

SUPPORTED, SILENCED, SUBDUED, OR SPEAKING UP? K12 EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN, 2021- 2022

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ABSTRACT

Across the country, effort is underway to restrict discussion, learning, and student support related to race and gender/sexual identity in educational settings, targeting schools with state legislation and politicians' orders; national conservative media and organizations; Board directives; and local actors wielding media-fueled talking points. To date, few analysts have yet explored in detail educators' lived experiences of these multi-level restriction efforts and local responses to them. In this article, we analyze 16 educators' experiences of 2021-22 restriction effort and local responses, with an eye to potential effects on student support and learning. Educators interviewed emphasized their recent experiences with *talking* about race and LGBTQ lives, with many emphasizing threatened punishment by critics for discussing these topics. Context mattered tremendously: While some educators enjoyed support and freedom in race and diversity-related discussion and learning, other educators described intensive restriction effort emanating from local, state, and national pressures. Respondents also indicated that responses from local district leaders, school leaders, and other community members amidst such multi-level restriction efforts were crucial in effecting restriction or protecting the ability to talk and learn. Data from this interview study suggest that the nation may be heading toward two schooling systems: one where children and adults get to talk openly about their diverse society and selves, and one where they are restricted or even prohibited from doing so. The fate of our nation's teaching, learning, and student support is up not only to the nation's teachers, principals, and superintendents, but us all.

Keywords: censorship, restriction, leadership, teaching, race, gender, LGBTQ

Introduction: A Nationally Networked Effort to Restrict Learning

Since January 2021, politicians have filed over 300 bills in 45 states to restrict students' ability to talk and learn in school about race, racism, gender, LGBTQ lives, diversity, and history. Twenty-two laws are now passed in 16 states to limit race- and LGBTQ-related learning (Young, Sachs, & Friedman, 2022). Between July 2021 and June 2022, politicians and inflamed local critics have tried to ban over 2,500 individual books from libraries or classrooms in 32 states, often books about racism, with protagonists of color, or with LGBTQ characters (PEN America, 2022); [PEN America](#) has now tracked over 4,000 such instances of banned books since July 2021, affecting 182 school districts in 37 states and millions of students (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). To date, approximately 150 districts nationwide have introduced local measures to limit race-related learning (Alexander, 2022). Legislation also increasingly seeks to restrict LGBTQ-related learning and support to youth, with 23 anti-LGBTQ bills just in 2022 (Young, Sachs, & Friedman, 2022) and over 30 introduced already in 2023.

These efforts are part of a nationally networked effort to restrict diversity- and inequality-related discussion, learning, and student support in educational settings— while inflaming Americans to battle public schools and one another. Indeed, in a 2020-21 study, Pollock, Rogers, and coauthors (including Kendall and Reece from this paper's research team; 2022) came to call this effort a *conflict campaign*: a strategic, purposeful effort to anger people about public schooling overall, via a coordinated attack first on a caricatured catchall vision of “Critical Race Theory” in K-12 public schools-- motivated in part to gain political power (see Background, below).¹ Simultaneous with state legislative efforts, national networking fueled by powerful conservative entities (media, organizations, foundations, PACs, and GOP politicians) has purposefully worked to inflame and equip local critics to target local teachers, schools, and boards over a caricatured, imagined proliferation of “Critical Race Theory” in K12 schools, with talking points, “toolkits,” and

trainings-- while increasingly targeting LGBTQ-related support and talk as well (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2023). Attacks on educators and students in national conservative media, state legislatures, and local districts and schools have since attempted to curtail a vast variety of discussions and student supports engaging issues of race/racism and also gender/sexual identity in schools, including by targeting “antiracist,” “equity,” or “DEI” effort; accurate and inclusive teaching about inequality throughout U.S. history; use of student-chosen pronouns or school bathrooms; and even “social emotional learning.” At this writing, Florida governor/presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis' administration had even banned a pilot AP course in African American history – and the College Board deleted content from it, potentially affecting learning opportunities nationwide.

Advocates, journalists, and some scholars have described the conflict campaign's legislative onslaught and local restriction activity (Lopez & Sleeter, forthcoming; TEDx Talks, 2022; UCLA Critical Race Studies, n.d.; White, 2022). New national research is starting to show overall trends in educator experience (Rogers & Kahne, 2023; Woo et al., 2022, Woo et al., 2023; see Prior Research, below). A recent nationally representative survey noted that “About one-quarter of teachers reported that limitations placed on how teachers can address topics related to race or gender have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices” (Woo et al., 2023, 1). Another national survey of principals in 2022 noted that half had experienced local efforts “to limit or challenge” teaching about issues of race and racism, or work on LGBTQ+ student rights (Rogers & Kahne, 2022, ix).

To date, however, few analysts have yet explored in detail educators' lived experiences of these multilevel threats to learning and local responses to them. In this article, we seek to offer such analysis of 16 educators' experiences of 2021-22 restriction effort and local responses, with an eye to potential effects on student support and learning.

For this article, we interviewed nearly twenty educators from across the country to deepen our

findings from a prior “conflict campaign” survey of 275 educators, the majority of whom described experiencing 2020-2021 anti-“CRT” action and restriction of race- and diversity-related learning (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022). We interviewed all initially willing survey respondents, who were mostly teachers and several district-level administrators. We asked a basic research question: *How, if at all, have educators (as of spring 2022) continued to experience and respond to any efforts to restrict K12 teaching and learning about race, racism, gender, and LGBTQ+ and other minoritized experiences?*

Building here on an analytic framework attending to “colormuteness” in schools, we share initial patterns in educator experience regarding a key conflict campaign goal: limiting *talk* of race and also LGBTQ lives in schools.² Educators interviewed emphasized their recent experiences with *talking* about race and LGBTQ lives, with many emphasizing threatened punishment by critics for discussing these topics. Context mattered tremendously: While some educators enjoyed support and freedom in race and diversity-related discussion and learning, other educators described intensive restriction effort emanating from local, state, and national pressures. Respondents also indicated that responses from local district leaders, school leaders, and other community members amidst such multi-level restriction efforts were crucial in effecting restriction or protecting the ability to talk and learn.

We label four educator *talk experiences* amidst such multi-level pressures. Some educators described 1) being *supported* by education leaders and communities to keep talking about race and diversity in efforts to support student learning and well-being, essentially sheltered locally from larger campaign forces. Conversely, educators working in states and communities where politicians or loud critics were attacking race- and LGBTQ-related efforts to support students described 2) being *silenced* into ending talk about race and LGBTQ lives at work, and 3) being *subdued* into muting such talk. Finally, some educators described 4) *speaking up* to insist on talking about race, racism, and LGBTQ experiences in society and schools in order to support students, despite restriction efforts.

In each case, educators noted how limiting *talk*, dialogue, and communication about real issues of race, gender, and sexual identity could reduce support to students themselves.

We emphasize that educators were not confined to single types of talk experience. This article presents a typology of experiences, not of educators (Stapley et al., 2022). We also note throughout the identities of educators responding and particularly the racialized and political demographics of their work locations, as educators themselves (educators of color re their own identities, and all educators re local demographics) often discussed these factors as central to their experiences along with state context and national trends.³ We call the broader context of nationally-fueled, state- and locally-enacted effort to restrict and punish race- and diversity-related talk, learning, and student support “the conflict campaign.”

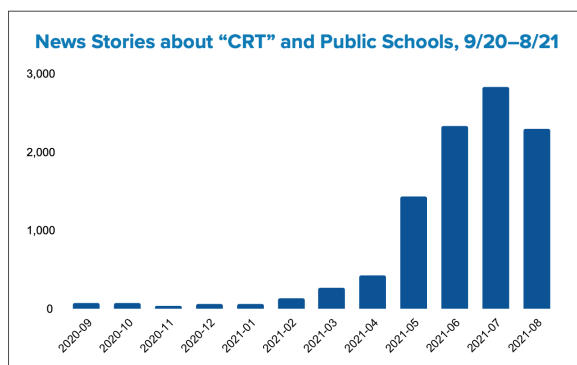
Below, we first offer background on the 2020+ conflict campaign, building on prior research (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022) and recent work by others. We then share a theoretical framework exploring how silencing race and diversity-related talk in schools risks limiting youth support. We then discuss our methods for investigating educators’ experiences via follow up interviews, and our findings about four versions of educator experience.

Prior research on the conflict campaign to restrict race- and diversity-related talk in K12 schools

The summer of 2020 and its nationwide protests denouncing police brutality sparked increasing K–12 education efforts to discuss and explore issues of race and racism in U.S. society. As one example (Matschiner, in progress), “equity directors” were hired in many of the nation’s largest districts, to help lead increased student-facing programming and professional development on race and diversity. In Spring 2021, a backlash from politicians, conservative organizations, and conservative media coverage targeting imagined “CRT” exploded along with explicitly restrictive state legislation efforts, ballooning from around 50 state bills filed by GOP legislators in 2021 to over 135 filed in 2022 (see

PEN America Index of Educational Gag Orders:
<http://bit.ly/3ZDtsPn>).

Figure 1 (from Pollock & Rogers, et al, 2022)



Bills first particularly sought to prohibit K12 discussion of a cut-and-paste list of so-called “divisive concepts” taken from a Trump executive order. Some such prohibitions caricatured actual teaching (imagining that teachers might tell students to agree that “one race, sex, or religion is inherently superior to another race, sex, or religion”), while others prohibited exploration of realities or concepts regarding racism, inequality, or gender and sexuality in U.S. society (e.g., whether the nation was shaped by racism in its founding; whether teachers in early grades could discuss LGBTQ lives). Freedom of expression organization PEN America has called these “educational gag orders,” “a sweeping crusade for content- and viewpoint-based state censorship,” and often pointedly, “a more general assault on discussions of systemic inequality” to “shut down important conversations in the classroom.” As examples of restrictions on race talk,

Minnesota’s HB 3301, for instance, [proposes] to forbid teachers from requiring that students examine ‘the role of race and racism in society, the social construction of race and institutionalized racism, and how race intersects with identity, systems, and policies.’ ...it is now illegal in [North Dakota] for public K–12 teachers to include any instruction suggesting that ‘racism is systemically embedded in American society and the American legal system to facilitate racial inequality.’ Language of this

type...has spread widely in 2022 (Young, Sachs, & Friedman, 2022).

Analogously, PEN America has tracked ballooning higher education efforts to restrict attention to race and DEI– and in K12, lawmakers’ efforts to censor discussion of LGBTQ lives, for younger children but also K12. “Twenty-three anti-LGBTQ+ bills that would censor classroom speech have been proposed in 2022, compared with just five in 2021” (Young, Sachs, & Friedman, 2022), and 2023 legislative efforts ferociously target LGBTQ youth and trans youth specifically (Shin et al., 2023).

Beyond state bills and orders, *local* demands fueled by national networking and conservative media have also ballooned since 2020 to restrict purported “CRT” and race- and LGBTQ-related learning, including through book ban efforts (PEN America, 2022), local demands for policies to restrict curricula (Alexander, 2022), and direct intimidation of educators attempting to talk and teach about race, diversity, and inequality (Yochim et al., 2023). Our research on such localized, nationally-fueled efforts between September 2020 and August 2021 (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022) focused on race-related anti “CRT” restriction campaigns and found nearly 900 school districts across the country (serving 18 million students, 35% of all K-12 students) experiencing local anti-“CRT” restriction effort through summer 2021, as covered in local media. These conflict-ridden districts were racially and ideologically diverse, in states with and without restrictive bills. Most (one in two) were “Racially Mixed and Majority White Districts” (50–84.9% White students), often in politically contested areas. The strongest predictor was whether the district had experienced rapid decrease in white population (18+%) over the last 20 years. As inflamed local actors wielded nationally shared strategies and language to battle districts and school educators, we called the virally spreading anti-“CRT” conflict campaign “a national campaign made real in part through local critics of schooling enacting state and local trends” -- “many local wildfires, one fire” (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022, vii).

Our report found that by the fall of 2021, conflict campaign experiences of local, state, and national restriction efforts had left many educators afraid to

discuss issues of race and diversity at all. In the summer and fall of 2021, a majority of the 275 educators surveyed reported experiencing a newly hostile environment for discussing race, racism, racial inequality, and gender or DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) issues more broadly. The majority of survey respondents and all but one of 21 district Equity Directors interviewed by a research team member (see also Matschiner, in progress) noted personally experiencing efforts to restrict learning on these issues in 2020-21, in places with and without state-level legislative efforts. Teacher and district respondents described a heightened level of “attack,” “intimidation,” and “threat” from legislation, “outside orgs,” and local critics, particularly sub-groups of highly vocal parents sometimes fueled by politicians. Our data showed alarming trends toward censorship and self-censorship of race/diversity talk, core to what First Amendment experts call “the chilling effect,” spilling into all kinds of localities. A white, Jewish female teacher in Ohio described “faculty terrified, confused, demoralized” by looming bills even in a largely liberal, majority students of color, demographically stable district. A white female teacher in a majority white, moderately changing, conservative-leaning district in Colorado (no bills at the time) said that “We are avoiding any topic that could potentially be incendiary. We’re afraid to teach anything about race [Frederick Douglass]; my colleague said she’s afraid to teach the Bill of Rights.”

Survey respondents also indicated that responses from local district and school leaders amidst such multi-level restriction efforts were crucial. Some described leaders that actively supported the freedom to learn: In a liberal-leaning, rapid-change, racially mixed New Jersey suburb (without state bills pending at the time⁴), a white female teacher described how “We were encouraged to reflect and grow [through] discussions about race and racism,” while in a large, predominantly and stably BIPOC liberal city in Pennsylvania, even with a state bill pending, another white female teacher noted that “We [kept] learning how to teach in a culturally responsive manner...actively trying to dismantle prejudice.” Some indicated leaders importantly attempting to clarify teachers’ existing rights, such as a district equity director, a Black woman in a

Southern state with legislation brewing, who described supporting local teachers in her liberal, rapid change, racially mixed/half-white district:

They are so afraid that anything they do is going to be critical race theory, right? Like if I even speak about someone being Black, right, that’s CRT....they’re looking to us to kind of say, “can I do this? Can I not?”

In contrast, other respondents described administrators “cautioning” or quietly abandoning “DEI” efforts, or actively censoring specific texts. A white female North Carolina teacher (in a state with legislation advanced but vetoed by the Governor in September 2021) noted at that time, “Our superintendent attended [PD] and told us to advise kids to ‘ask your parents’ instead of try to show evidence to a child whose family swears the Holocaust didn’t happen... we are scared to get in trouble and I have avoided subjects I usually would’ve taught because I don’t want to be accused of indoctrinating.”

Other administrators were passively leaving teachers unclear about their right to teach about race, diversity, and basic history in places where state bills *or* local critics threatened such work. In a rapidly changing, racially-mixed/majority white, politically contested district in New Jersey, a white male teacher called for “a clear and direct statement” from leaders to avoid “chilling” teaching and learning in the face of local pushback (New Jersey had no bills filed at that time, though it does now):

In May or June 2021, efforts were underway in [our district] to attack teaching and professional development that addresses systemic racism, sexual education, texts and teaching that represent members of the LGBTQIA+ ...Efforts were led by parents, many of whom are associated with parent groups on social media. Other individuals from outside our community came to join the fray. These parents and their allies in this effort have taken to board meetings and other community forums to deliver incendiary remarks, often not grounded in the reality of classrooms or curriculum, to

attack teachers and their freedom to deliver instruction on topics that are meaningful to students, and that are politically (but not educationally) contested today. These parents and allies have also filed freedom of information requests from our school administrators demanding access to emails, as well as years worth of lesson plans. ...

Educators are left wondering what they can or cannot do in the classroom, often feeling like they now have to ask permission before addressing any “controversial” topic, or choosing to avoid it altogether... Without a clear and direct statement from district leadership or union leadership, many educators are concerned about the “chilling” atmosphere this will have on teaching and learning.

Finally, educators surveyed indicated how such unprotected “chilling” of talk restricted youth support itself. Teachers reported efforts to restrict basic availability to students of books featuring Black or LGBTQ characters; keywords core to youth support programming (“‘diversity’ ‘social justice’ & ‘inclusion’”); and learning about “Anything suggesting systemic racism or oppression of any group.” Many indicated they would avoid making “controversial” topics like “race” or “race & gender” available to students in class dialogue.

New research is demonstrating more recent educator experiences amidst multilevel pressures to limit learning -- and the importance of local leaders specifically in shaping local teaching and learning opportunity. A 2022 Rand survey found “1 in 4 teachers told to limit class talk on hot-button issues” by school or district leaders in 2021 (Belsha, 2022, re Woo et al., 2022, p 19). A next RAND study (Woo et al., 2023) noted that a quarter of teachers reported reshaping their teaching and curricular choices due to state *and* local, formal and informal “limitations placed on how teachers can address topics related to race or gender.” While teachers reported their own responses ranging from resistance to compliance, “Teachers perceived that limitations placed on how they can address race- or gender-related topics negatively affected their

working conditions, and they worried about limitations' consequences for student learning.” Study authors recommended explicitly that “school and district leaders should provide teachers with the appropriate guidance, resources, and supports to address contentious topics in the classroom and message their support for teachers” (Woo et al., 2023, 1).

Research also is showing leaders themselves under fire. Rogers & Kahne (2022) noted that in the 2021-2022 school year, half of principals surveyed nationally described experiencing localized pressures from often small groups of “conservative” parents and community members to restrict learning and dialogue about race, gender, diversity, and current events. Particularly in politically divided “Purple” communities and secondarily “Red” (predominantly Republican) communities, school leaders also were getting pressure from their own district leaders to limit such work. While district leaders in Blue communities were proactively supporting such work, “Purple” and “Red” communities’ principals accordingly were often limiting both teacher professional development and student support efforts on race and diversity, even amidst spikes in student harassment:

Almost a quarter (23%) of principals in Purple communities report their school board or district leaders took action to *limit* teaching and learning about race and racism — more than in Red communities (17%), and far more than in Blue communities (8%). Conversely, Principals in Blue communities are much more likely than principals in Purple or Red communities to report that their school board or district leadership acted to *promote* such teaching and learning. (19)

Finally, a new nationally representative survey study on district leaders (Jochim et al, 2023) has found that nearly a third of district leaders across the country themselves “reported verbal or written threats against educators about politically controversial topics” in the 2021–22 school year (along with book ban efforts), with such “controversial” topics including basic racialized and LGBTQ experiences in our society, along with

COVID policy. Such threats were notably most common “in historically advantaged districts (i.e., low-poverty districts, suburban districts, and majority-white districts).” Bluntly, half of the district leaders surveyed – and particularly, in districts serving predominantly white students – reported that along with COVID issues, political polarization around LGBTQ inclusion and teaching about race “was interfering with their ability to educate students as of fall 2022.”

Forthcoming research is exploring recent restriction efforts targeting Black school-level educators (Moore, forthcoming); equity officers, most often BIPOC professionals and particularly, Black women (Matschiner, forthcoming); and teachers attempting to serve students of color more successfully after attending external professional development (Wells et al., forthcoming).

For this article, we set forth to supplement such work and our own 2020-2021 findings (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022) through 1-1 interviews with willing survey respondents, asking, *How, if at all, have educators (as of spring 2022) continued to experience and respond to any efforts to restrict K12 teaching and learning about race, racism, gender, and LGBTQ+ and other minoritized experiences?* In much of our data, educators discussed efforts to continue or discontinue *talking* about race, and secondarily about LGBTQ-related experiences, in attempts to support students. We thus next briefly discuss a framework from prior literature focused on *limiting talk in schools*, specifically about race. Such scholarship turns attention to how active refusals to discuss race and diversity-related realities in K12 settings can limit student support efforts – a key consequence of the conflict campaign.

Framework

Prior scholarship on *colormuteness* (Pollock, 2004) explored the consequences of K-12 educators actively “muting” their own school talk about race (vs not “seeing” race, as connoted in the typical term “colorblindness.”)⁵ While some speakers choose for antiracist reasons to avoid discussing race in a specific harmful way, “colormuteness” generally limiting race-related talk can limit

supports for children of color particularly, as situations harming students in schools and beyond (e.g., graduation, discipline, and achievement patterns; inequality of opportunity) literally cannot be named, discussed, and remedied. In next work (2008), Author 1 demonstrated how efforts to limit policy language about harms to students of color in schools also can limit efforts at supporting the children of color discussed. Author 1 then marshaled hundreds of examples of educational research demonstrating how to support students, people in schools must attempt to accurately and thoroughly discuss real issues of race and diversity, with student support in mind (Pollock, 2017).

Indeed, most curricular traditions focused on supporting students of color or LGBTQ youth emphasize the need to try to thoroughly discuss real issues and experiences of diversity, inequality, and harm in society, and in schools themselves, in efforts to support students (Kumashiro, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lopez & Sleeter, 2022; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016). Education research also indicates that pursuing such accurate and inclusive discussion in classrooms of the full range of American histories and lives, particularly the experiences of those long disserved by unequal opportunity systems, is essential to supporting both young people of color and white students (Gonzales et al., 2021; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). Researchers have pointed out that deleting discussions of race, gender, LGBTQ lives, and broader diversity from classrooms and school climates more broadly harms students by denigrating the identities excluded and making lived experiences impossible to discuss (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). Many identity-based student-driven clubs seek pointedly to counter classroom silencing through extracurricular activities inviting inclusive discussion of real lives (Kendall, forthcoming; Poteat et al., 2017). Recent research reviews have emphasized that silencing discussions of/critical thinking about history and society leaves all students underequipped (Lee et al., 2021; National Education Association & the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance, 2022). Such scholarship turns attention to how muting, refusing, limiting, and deleting school talk about real experiences of race, diversity, and inequality can hurt students tremendously.

Today's "conflict campaign" efforts to restrict such talk in schools can be seen as backlash to more K-12 educators *attempting* to talk about such issues more thoroughly, accurately, and compassionately – a long-term goal for some and for others, a more recent response to activism demanding that schools finally discuss and remedy inadequate opportunities and harmful climates (Matschiner, in progress) while supporting more thorough societal understanding of racism historically and now (Hannah Jones et al., 2021; Kendi, 2017; Kendi, 2019). The conflict campaign is in part a direct backlash to efforts to support minoritized and all students better – a pointed example of how local education activity is so often shaped by broader political and racialized forces, often ultimately harming minoritized students particularly (Oakes et al., 1998; Diamond, 2022).

In much of our data in 2021 and again in 2022, educators described a mix of local, state, and national pressures seeking to restrict efforts to talk and support students in their districts, schools, and classrooms. We thus came to ask of our data *how* (and whether) educators were experiencing efforts to restrict their talk at work, and how they were responding to these pressures.

Methods

For this paper, we returned to our 275 survey respondents (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022) and invited follow-up interviews in spring 2022 with all who had indicated on the survey that they were willing to do an interview or focus group. Data here tap almost all respondents who scheduled an interview with us after repeated attempts. We sought to learn as of Spring 2022: how, if at all, were educators experiencing and reacting to restriction efforts *now*?

Data from 18 conducted interviews to date did not actively sample educators in places with restrictive state laws. We went with the willing who responded to repeated interview invitations. We decided to focus this paper on interviews from educators

working in public school systems, not independent schools (1 respondent) or charter networks (1 respondent); we thus focus here on 16 out of our 18 interviews (Table 1). Of our 16, 11 were currently working in states with either laws passed or bills pending at the time of our interview. Three were working in states with laws/ executive orders restricting instruction on issues of race, gender, or sexual identity; eight were working in states with such bills pending, and one teacher networked with teachers in a state with bills filed [RI] while working himself nearby in one with no bills [CT]. One Colorado educator (in a state without gag order legislation) worked in a district starting to enact board-level restrictions after a board election "flipped" board members to "anti-CRT" campaigners.

As in earlier work (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2021, 2022), we notate each respondent's local district demographics as we share their words, noting the existence of state policy action; district racialized enrollment; and local voting patterns.

We sent each participant an email invitation, reminding the participants that they previously completed a survey for the Conflict Campaign report and that we were conducting confidential follow-up interviews to the survey. If participants were still interested in an interview, they were asked to choose from three potential interview dates and times. We sent two follow-up emails to each participant; four additional participants (beyond our 18) did not make it to the scheduled interviews.

Many of those who agreed to interview were *key informants* (Emerson et al., 2011) who had offered particularly detailed stories on our survey. We interviewed all willing respondents in Spring 2022, for a total of 18 as of fall 2022. In just one case in the fall of 2022, we interviewed an educator who belonged to the same organizational lists as those surveyed but had not filled out the initial survey. Interview respondents were mostly teachers, with several district-level administrators and Equity Directors (EDs).

Table 1*Interviewee Demographics⁶*

| Interviewee | Race | Gender | Role | State context at time of interview | District % white | District % change | District voting pattern |
|-------------|------------------|--------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Asian American | female | teacher | Maryland, no legislation | majority students of color | rapid change | liberal |
| 2 | white | male | district admin | Washington, DC, no legislation | majority students of color | NA | liberal |
| 3 | white | male | teacher | New York, bills pending | majority students of color | unavailable | liberal |
| 4 | white | female | teacher | Ohio, 3 bills pending | predominantly white | moderate change | liberal |
| 5 | woman of color | female | equity director | Colorado, no bills at the time | racially mixed and majority white | rapid change | contested |
| 6 | white | female | teacher | Virginia, executive order issued | predominantly white | moderate change | conservative leaning |
| 7 | Black | female | equity officer | North Carolina, 2 bills introduced | racially mixed and majority white | rapid change | liberal |
| 8 | white | male | teacher | Connecticut (no bills at the time) and Rhode Island (bills introduced) | both predominantly white | unavailable | both liberal leaning |
| 9 | African-American | female | equity consultant | Midwestern metropolitan region, in a state with bills pending | racially mixed and majority white | unavailable given metro region | unavailable given metro region |
| 10 | white | female | teacher | New Hampshire, with legislation | racially mixed and majority white | unavailable | contested |
| 11 | white | female | teacher | Indiana, 8 bills introduced but defeated | racially mixed and majority white | rapid change | conservative |
| 12 | Black | female | teacher | Missouri, bill pending | racially mixed and majority white | unavailable | liberal |
| 13 | white | female | teacher | California, no legislation | majority students of color | rapid change | contested |
| 14 | white | female | teacher | Kentucky, with legislation | racially mixed and majority white | minimal change | conservative |
| 15 | Black | male | DEI director | Michigan, 2 bills pending | predominantly white | unavailable | conservative leaning |
| 16 | man of color | male | teacher | North Carolina, 2 bills introduced | racially mixed and majority white | rapid change | liberal |

In our unstructured interviews, which typically lasted up to one hour on Zoom, we asked a combination of informal questions to explore any recent experiences of efforts to support or restrict learning (we took care not to presume that restriction was happening). We sought to explore the heterogeneity of experiences and to gather

palpable data (Small & Calarco, 2022), meaning detailed stories that respondents felt illuminated various experiences of pressure or support. We also sought to understand the specifics of local community interactions over learning about race and diversity in school.

In initial open coding (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), we saw immediately how many examples involved struggles over talking about race, and secondarily LGBTQ lives, in school. We thus started coding data to name the variety of talk experiences that educators were describing. We noted a mix of educators speaking on these topics without much hindrance, speaking no longer, speaking less, and speaking up more actively. Respondents often indicated how such experiences of talking affected student support efforts, as communicating could mean making a book's discussion available to students, or not; continuing or discontinuing an effort to discuss and address an issue harming students, like racial discipline disparities; use or prohibition of posters made by students to communicate inclusion activities to peers; and more. Many noted how a primary targeting of race talk was morphing into a campaign to restrict gender and LGBTQ talk simultaneously.

We thus started to code more categorically (Luttrell, 2010) for these four types of recent, repeated educator experiences with talking and communicating locally about race and secondarily gender/sexuality in student support efforts. We first named these types of interviewee *response* to their situation (e.g., teachers “stepping back” vs “stepping forward”), but we then noted that most stories actually described behavior by the leaders *around* interviewees. Educators’ own responses to pressures to talk less about race and also LGBTQ lives depended not just on their own agency mobilizing local “backup” for such work (Pollock et al., 2022b), but also particularly on whether local district and school leaders provided guidance and support to protect students’ and teachers’ ability to speak, learn, and act re such issues in our society. That is, as *leaders* reacted to localized, state, and nationally-driven restriction pressures, educators “below” them were being:

- *Supported* (in locations where leaders and communities continued to clearly support race talk and LGBTQ talk efforts, teachers and administrators were continuing dialogue on such issues)

Amidst stronger restriction pressure, often due to leadership’s own restriction efforts or weak responses to others’ pressure, educators were being:

- *Silenced* (ending specific forms of discussion about race or LGBTQ realities, through restriction by higher-ups and also via self-censorship)
- *Subdued*: (continuing more softly in race talk and LGBTQ-related talk, while also muting and diminishing their own talk)

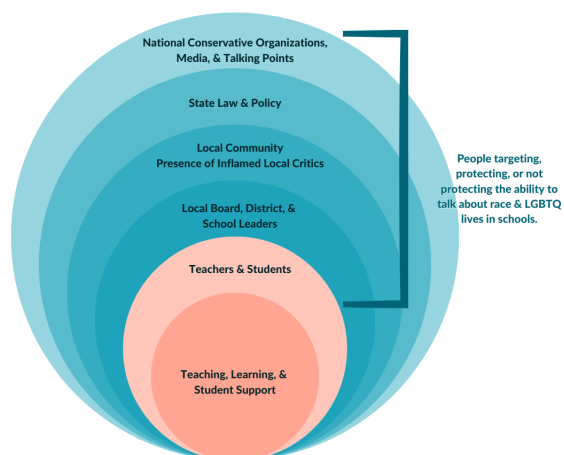
Conversely, some educators experiencing restriction pressures were explicitly taking leadership roles themselves in schools, districts, and communities, and modeling:

- *Speaking up* (insisting in so many words on the right to talk and learn about race and also LGBTQ lives, despite restriction efforts).

Each form of talking or not talking about race or LGBTQ issues at work was linked to supporting or not supporting students themselves.

Respondents repeatedly demonstrated how educators’ abilities to talk and communicate for student support were shaped locally by their own and local school/district leaders’/community members’ reactions to shared national pressures, local agitation, restrictive or supportive state law/policy, and local community politics. We thus came to think about multi-level system pressures in this analysis, with teaching and learning existing within broader contexts of support or threat (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Multi-Layered Restriction Pressures*



Overall, participants described local actors navigating both local and state environments amidst a national campaign. Many respondents noted explicitly how national campaign talking points were repeated locally by inflamed activists; many also emphasized how state legal contexts provided pivotal threat to or support for race/diversity talk. Respondents also often explicitly noted local communities' political as well as racial demographics, summing up whether communities or districts were "supportive" (often summarized as "liberal") or "conservative" (often framed as threatening to race/diversity talk), and how "white" these contexts were. Many also emphasized the role of vocal minorities, local parent and non-parent community members described as intimidating, loud, frequent, persistent, typically "white," "conservative," or "Trumpian" individuals or small groups, fueled by national media and state politics to attack local learning. Leaders' local responses to all of the above then helped restrict talk or support it – demonstrating leaders' own pivotal role in multi-level pressures operating simultaneously across connected levels of systems (Woulfin & Allen, 2022). Finally, educators of color described particularly aggressive restriction efforts targeting them personally (see also Woo et al., 2023, Matschiner, in progress). We thus notate educators' own race and gender, their locality's political and racial demographics, and the context of state legislation as we share educators' experience stories.⁷

Given the field's need to rapidly understand educators' experiences with the conflict campaign, we emphasize rapid response in this contribution, versus insisting on a much larger sample that would afford substantive demographic analysis. We seek to meet Small & Calarco's (2022) metrics for rigorous qualitative research by pursuing depth of understanding through detailed, concrete stories about "specific instances involving specific people in specific settings at specific moments in time" (2022), and through "followup" with known 2021 survey respondents versus seeking quantity of new interviewees. We also consider this a *temporal* case study, prioritizing analyzing experiences among K12 educators *at a particular moment in time* amidst a rapidly accelerating national phenomenon. We seek here to contribute initial patterns and rich data examples to the field in a rapid response manner for next consideration by other researchers.

We now share four forms of local *talk experience* our interviewees described by spring and fall 2022. The first ("supported") occurred in work/community environments actively enabling race/diversity talk. The next three ("silenced," "subdued," and "speaking up") occurred in work/community environments where efforts to restrict such talk were more pervasive. We present findings for this paper in the form of stories illuminating each talk experience, with additional patterns and educator examples to be shared in forthcoming work.

Findings

Some 2022 interviewees echoed a finding from our 2021 survey-based report: educators continued work to explore and discuss race and diversity (and get better at teaching about these topics) if local leaders and community members supported this amidst local, state and national pressures. Community pressure contexts differed tremendously amidst a shared national conflict campaign. For one, only some respondents described working in state contexts where politicians were threatening race- and LGBTQ-related work with bills and executive orders. Respondents also described living in local communities either relatively free of inflamed activists or roiled by their restriction efforts. Within

such differing contexts, interviewees said, supports from district leaders, school leaders, and local communities were necessary to sustain race- and diversity-related teaching, learning, and student support. We thus analyze throughout respondents' discussion of local, state, and national contexts for their work, and of local leaders' pivotal role in determining education's fate within those broader contexts. We begin with several examples showing what it looks like now to work in a place where colleagues, community, and state alike back up the effort to learn to talk about race, racism, identity, diversity, and history (Pollock et al, 2022b) – or at least, do not openly restrict it.

Supported

Some educators pointedly compared state contexts of support and law, comparing states that seemingly allowed free inquiry to states that clearly didn't. As one Asian American female teacher in Maryland (a state without proposed legislation) put it in noting a recent district "anti-racist audit," "we're not like Florida":

Interviewer: does Maryland have any like, legislation that's potentially going to be passed, around restricting efforts around race --like CRT, like that kind of stuff like some other states do?

Teacher: I don't know. I don't know if our anti racist audit was by the state or our district just wanting to do it. Um, I know there's nothing saying we can't. You know, we're not like Florida....there's nothing saying we can't.... I don't know if there's anything saying that we have to.

Her words indicated how local district activity also mattered. This teacher's district was liberal with a majority of students of color, with a recent rapid drop in the white population. The teacher indicated that *within* her state, activity in her "liberal area," "school system," and "specific school" combined to allow and support learning and dialogue to continue and even expand:

So our school system is really pushing hard for ...more of that kind of teaching. So

we at our specific school hired a diversity and inclusion curriculum coordinator, and we also piloted a new course specifically about diversity in STEM. We also have – I guess we're being encouraged to include a lot more diversity and equity lessons into our curriculum all over all the subjects... so I think, for us, we live, obviously in a fairly liberal area of Maryland – we're getting support and encouragement to add more discussions about race and equity, all of it.

The teacher noted how these district "supports" and "opportunities to talk" and "increase ... their discussions of antiracism" in system "trainings," "audits," and "professional development" had grown in response to "The George Floyd murder" and protests, then continued because people in local schools "wanted to" have these "opportunities":

It was definitely the George Floyd murder and then the protests that happened afterwards, because it essentially happened during virtual learning... the effort to make it something that we talk about really started then.Our school system, the whole county is going through an antiracist audit, and each school got to kind of figure out how they wanted to increase (...) their discussions of antiracism. We did some professional development, our school has an equity team ... the whole system has an equity team. And they hold trainings and things like that. So it just, it became a lot more prevalent and there were a lot more opportunities to talk about these issues.

While emphasizing support from "the whole system," the teacher also noted the importance of school-level leadership in keeping "diversity and inclusion" work going if some unsupportive "community response" arose in their local "liberal area." She emphasized school-level "support from our administration" to protect teachers' efforts to "talk," while noting this might be harder in "neighboring counties":

Teacher: The reason I feel we get a lot of support from our administration is because our principal chose specifically to create a

job position called diversity and inclusion curriculum coordinator, and it's sort of his job to (...) filter some of the community response to what we're doing. But like I said, we live in a pretty liberal area— I think most of what we're getting is support.

Interviewer: yeah, has there been any, like, complaints or things like that at any school board meetings at all that you're aware of?

Teacher: no, not for us in [our] county.....In the neighboring counties there were (...) I feel like we have a lot of people, we can go to – well, besides the diversity and inclusion curriculum coordinator. The equity team that we have, I've been to enough of their trainings —I actually know a lot of them enough, that I can say “hey, I wanted to talk about blah blah blah in my class, how do I do that?” and they would send me resources on how to do that.

Other respondents emphasized the importance of district level support while more indirectly noting the absence of state level restriction effort. A white male district-level administrator in Washington, DC, indicated how proactive district support allowed local teaching on race issues to proceed uninterrupted, notably in a highly liberal location that long had served mostly students of color (with a small recent increase in white students) and did not have state politicians at all. This administrator had clicked “no” and “NA” regarding any restrictions on our 2021 survey. Now, he noted that new district standards (in process for several years) actually highlighted Critical Race Theory as one framework students could learn about in studying racism in history and social studies. The district also had tapped free *1619 Project* resources from the Pulitzer Center in their exploration of deepening instruction on U.S. history. He explained, “I think from DC residents, I think this is fairly well in line with what people have been asking for.”

The administrator noted that the national conflict campaign still affected DC, describing “just flying below the radar... of some of the national political operatives.” Still, he also noted that the effort

elsewhere to “leverage” “CRT” as a “cultural wedge issue to gin up support for the Republican base and maybe steer some white suburban voters back to the Republican Party in advance of the 2022 midterm elections,” was “not really a calculus that affects DC.” Further, the administrator suggested, the majority of local teachers themselves were on board with discussing race in society:

The majority of the students that we serve are black or brown, right, and that's also true of the majority of our teaching force. And so, I do think that there's --not from every teacher, certainly-- but I think the majority of our teachers are knowledgeable about some of the kinds of issues of how race has impacted American history or world history, and how multiple perspectives need to be taken into account.

Still, the administrator also described the role of explicit district encouragement supporting teachers to talk about these issues, noting, “One of the things that that our team has tried to do is to be really clear with our teachers and school leaders that we want teachers to engage in the kinds of conversations that, you know, help students unpack ... the full history of our country.” Through a monthly professional development newsletter, he added, “we try to reinforce and support teachers” in “engaging in conversations about ... potentially controversial issues.” A current events section had offered resources supporting teacher dialogue on the Ukraine, the white supremacist massacre in Buffalo, “racial violence,” and January 6 (“they're going to need to talk about this tomorrow... at school.. we're like right in Capitol Hill”). Also, through local partnerships with museums and universities, the administrator said, teachers “have a lot of access to professional learning to build their own knowledge, skills, about particular issues, but also how to engage in the kind of conversations that we're asking [them] to do”:

I think we've tried to— from the district level, reinforce for teachers like, “this is important for you to talk about, we want to support you [in] talking about it, we want to give you the right resources so that you can feel comfortable in doing that.” And so you

know...I can't say that every teacher in [the] district totally feels like they have exactly all the support that they need, but I think that's the goal that we are trying to strive for.

Still, the national conflict campaign was threatening local learning, via Fox News-fueled intimidation amplifying critiques by “a few parents”:

There was one of our elementary schools, who did some kind of antiracist training, ...and then ... got some pushback from a few parents and ended up on Fox News. ... I think there was some, like, nasty messages sent, or maybe even death threats sent to some of the staff members in regard to that.

The administrator added that his team was considering how to “help teachers prepare for the kind of backlash” other people were “getting in different locations” after “movement ...in the direction of equity and racial justice.” He hoped backlash didn’t become “physical violence”:

I think we've started talking about, like, do we need to start having a conversation with our teachers?.....sort of like, [you're] in perhaps the front lines of, like, civil rights work at this point, and there is some degree of danger...that can exist. And so, how do you take steps to protect yourself? You know whether that's just from a social media standpoint, you know, turning things to private or ... turning off replies and direct messages...And I know some colleagues in the states have.... removed email addresses from websites, to prevent people from harassing them, you know ... we'll just reflect on the idea of like, well, *I might get attacked for this*. You know, [in a] rhetorical sense but maybe even beyond that. I think that's something that we're starting to think about. How we might prepare teachers ...even just psychologically, or with the tools to try to navigate that if it happens.

He noted that in such “harassing,” “that is 100% their intention... to get people to self-censor as much as possible.” The understandable teacher “knee jerk reaction” to such intimidation, he said,

would be “I'll just avoid this.” And to “push them past that initial reaction,” he noted, district supporters could say to teachers,

Alright look, you're going to expect this to happen at some point, right, and be ready for it. And here's some strategies and approaches to think about, so that ... you don't just stop. Because ... we know it's important and our students deserve it.

Some district leaders thus proactively protected teaching, learning, and student support as a national conflict campaign catalyzed local threat. Educators in other locations described both district and school leaders sustaining and even expanding work through continued professional development as well as school-level “equity” roles and “programs.” In predominantly BIPOC, liberal New York City, even in a state with pending bills, a white teacher had checked boxes indicating no restrictions in 2021. Now, he noted that recent effort to discuss race and “sex and gender” more fully was “in full swing” and supported by a district “department of education mandate kind of coming down from the top, and every school is participating”:

I've certainly noticed more this year programs being rolled out that focus on these issues, what's being called, you know, CRT in the media. We...have sort of an equity liaison now, it's a role that didn't exist before in my school. We're having more lessons. . .periodically geared towards students, but there is some talk about professional development sessions, for you know faculty as well... related to issues of sex and gender and race and social emotional learning and all that.

Such leadership could help sustain and invite learning even in politically contested communities. The teacher added that in his school’s neighborhood with “multimillion dollar houses” including “lots of students” “from you know conservative families” in this “blue city,” “I haven't noticed any censorship, nothing is becoming missing from our libraries.” Indeed, students in his school were getting the opportunity to analyze the conflict campaign itself:

Some of my colleagues, for example, in their government classes are discussing... some of these issues that are happening around the country, like the library censorship. The Don't Say Gay bill in Florida. So like, we're discussing those issues but we're not really seeing them, you know, at our doorstep. We're talking about it more as an academic exercise.

Other educators noted how a supportive local “community,” “district,” and school “administration” could make a difference in blunting threatening state legal contexts. A white female teacher in a predominantly white, moderately changing liberal district in Ohio had noted in 2021 how even as “politicians” who “presented two Ohio House bills” were targeting “any text or conversation portraying slavery as anything EXCEPT a betrayal of our country's founding principles,” “Our district supports our increased DEI efforts. My colleagues and I have been moving forward.” Now, she described her community standing behind an antiracism resolution, even in a state with laws pending to restrict learning:

I feel like I'm really lucky, because I'm in a supportive community, district. I have supportive administration. Five miles down, that's not the case in other districts. If I worked in a district where I do have to take certain books off my shelves, or I do have to completely rewrite an entire unit, I think I'd be at a point where I'm like, I'm not doing this anymore. But because I'm here and I do have that support, it makes a world of difference. Yeah, I'm very lucky and I know it.

She also noted how in a state with draconian pending laws, even a few local parents emailing repeatedly to voice “national opposition” could threaten learning. Yet experienced professionals with a “supportive community” could overall keep pursuing ongoing teaching improvement. She noted that “I work very hard to create, like a quality curriculum that engages and honors all students.... And to be fair, it did make me like, audit my curriculum very carefully. Am I using unfair

language? Am I being too one sided, in this particular activity, or whatever? And I think that was good. I probably needed to do that”:

How should we examine our curriculum in the face of this national opposition that's occurring? ... almost every time I get a parent email, I'm like, look at this one. And [a colleague is] good about, like, bringing me back down. Like, that's one person. All you have to do is respond to these questions. My principal was awesome, too. So ... I stress less because I know that they will both ... like, help me be okay.

Supported, she thus continued to improve her teaching about race and diversity, vs. ending such efforts. In other locations where local or state restriction effort felt fueled by threat of punishment *without* backup from a “supportive community,” we found educators experiencing two next forms of pressure and reaction. Often, respondents commented on how local leadership did *not* back up their efforts to keep pursuing student support, such that they were:

Silenced (Leaders and teachers were ending race- or LGBTQ-related discussions in reaction to restriction pressure).

Subdued (educators were continuing in race/diversity talk while also muting it to avoid punishment, often given leaders' cautions or lukewarm protections).

We end with examples of educators themselves taking on leadership roles in schools, districts, and communities and modeling *speaking up* – insisting in so many words on the right to learn and talk about race and diversity, despite restriction efforts.

We first describe educators silenced and pressured to no longer discuss race issues or LGBTQ lives.

Silenced

In states with formal legislation “going after teachers,” some district or school level administrators helped effect restriction locally. On our 2021 survey, as one example, a white male

teacher from a majority white, conservative, substantially changing district in Tennessee had described how after passage of a state gag order, “As a social studies department we were told we cannot say things are racist [or that] it was sexist to keep women from voting.” In Idaho, where a new state order signed April 2021 prohibited public schools from compelling “critical race theory” and barred funding for prohibited speech, a white female educator working in higher education described how:

PD...with tribes have been halted...a tribal leader was told that there will be no more “culturally responsive teaching stuff” in their school. Teachers... have felt they need to change their curriculum if they teach about critical thinking & social justice Particularly any curriculums that teach Native American histories/Black history.

In 2022 interviews, respondents described other ways district and community actors contributed to silencing race and diversity talk, including in states without restrictive legislation. Board members were one such crucial actor. Flipping school boards to anti-“CRT” members has been a major goal of the conflict campaign (Pollock & Rogers, 2022). On our 2021 survey, a Colorado Equity Director (ED)—herself a woman of color, in a contested, rapid change, now half white school district—had described “outside orgs who are trying to flip board seats this November. Parents are ‘leading’ some of the efforts. We also have boards in the city who have actively banned CRT.” When we interviewed her in 2022, she noted how a newly flipped anti-“CRT” school board was trying to restrict “talk about racism” via detailed curricular review:

[The Board is] wanting to look at every curriculum adoption, with a fine tooth comb. And you know the social emotional learning curriculum, they're looking at that with a fine tooth comb—because it talks about racism and microaggressions.

The new board had immediately “mutually parted ways” with an equity-oriented Superintendent and was now “telling principals that have equity teams at their school level that they should rename their

teams, they're not equity teams any more.” Now books and entire subject discussions intended to support children felt “on the chopping block” for deletion:

We've got, you know, CORA requests around what books are in our libraries. Wanting to know how many copies, if they're in circulation. So I do think that next, social emotional learning is also on the chopping block [as if] “CRT.”... [and] They said we should not be teaching anything but reading, writing and math in elementary school. No social studies, because we're “indoctrinating.” And no science, because that is also “indoctrination.”

She indicated that in combination with this newly flipped board, local conflict campaigners prompting such shutdown of work through record requests and board complaints were just “very loud” and fueled by more national organizations, as opposed to a “big” group:

They feel big, but I don't think they're that big... when I look at the board meetings online it's the same nine or 10 people that show up [to complain about] critical race theory— you know, anti equity... it's the same folks and I'll give them 15 tops. And ... a lot of them aren't from our district. FEC United, I don't know what that stands for, is a part of this, the “Foundation of Tolerance and Racism” [[sic]] is a part of this. So they send their representatives every single time. But it doesn't feel very big, they're just very loud.

In the ultimate silencing, she was leaving her position to take care of her personal stress level – and to avoid getting fired personally, which she anticipated was next:

I do not want to be fired and I know that's the next move. [The former Superintendent] was my direct supervisor and the only cover that I have, and now... I have to feed my family. ... They will probably pull back the equity policy, and they will probably dissolve this department.... It's a mess.

In states with officially restrictive policies, educators described how state policy and national conflict campaign tactics combined with local Board, district, and school-level directives to silence race and diversity talk with students.

In our 2021 survey, a white female teacher from a largely white, conservative-leaning, moderately changing community in Virginia had described local targeting of “Critical Race Theory” via “opinion pages of the paper ... filled with letters to the editor about our children (white) ... being treated poorly and made to feel bad about their skin color.” The situation made her “Unsure what I am allowed to say and teach.” In 2022, she described what it felt like to now have a tip line to the Governor. We note that since the new Governor’s election, Virginia also now had a January 2022 executive order barring “inherently divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory” (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022). The school board also helped effect these state restrictions:

...as far as race, they said at the school board meeting that we are not to do CRT and we're not allowed to do *The 1619 Project*. Which I then went out and read, because I was like “Okay, I need to know what I'm not”... and ...But they have not come to the point where they've.... where they're observing us to see. The Governor has set up a tattle tale line, so that if a parent thinks that their children are being taught something that's inappropriate or you know makes children feel bad about their color or whatever, that we get that it can be reported.... It's one more step in my thought process, ‘Is this how I wanted to teach this subject?’

I’m part of middle school, so studies for our curriculum is Civil War and Reconstruction... [and I want] to be honest. And so, everything that I do as I --like in my lesson, I'm thinking, is that the way I should phrase?... it is *somebody's going to take that wrong*. For the first time this year I was like, should I even include parts of those lessons? Which breaks my heart.

She noted how local context exacerbated state restriction power. The norm in the district was already “tipped towards ...don’t discuss race, don’t discuss gender.” In combination with state-level regulations and now a “tattle tale line,” plus school board prohibitions, local “people” were seemingly “wanting to restrict” a diversifying population from ever exploring history more “honestly”:

I would say that the people who are wanting to restrict, and basically what they're saying is, “we just want to keep it the same as it's always been... we don't want change”....They are the people who have lived here forever who, you know, have family that goes back 150 years. And, that it's mostly people who have moved in.that have different ideas, ...who would like to see a little bit more honesty.

...[in] Virginia ...our history is so tied up in slavery, and ... the Jim Crow era and [segregation], and there's so many historic events ---and yet, if you look at the list of what we're to teach, it's barely touched on.

Despite already “barely” teaching race issues, school-level administration was also now explicitly starting to urge teachers to limit teaching further beyond “parameters”:

I've always been lucky to work ...somewhere with administration that is pretty... you know, loose, about “these are what you have to teach, how you want to get there is up to you.” And for the first time... In the last couple of years, it's a little bit more and more each time. “Yes, this is what we want you to teach but we don't want you to go outside of parameters”... like, “teach just this.” And I'm really afraid that I'll do something wrong.

She also indicated that amidst broader state pressures, necessary “guidance” and “clear policy” from district-level leaders was lacking. She had seen just one effort of strong district leadership regarding a book ban effort (“The books were all either by people of color or people who have

multiple or, you know, varying genders,” she said). “Luckily, the school division said, ‘we have a procedure in place, we will review these books, we will report back,’” she described, saying that all but one targeted book remained on the shelves. Yet in this same district, overall, leadership was not backing up teachers for the classroom conversations about race and diversity that students were initiating “on a daily basis.” She hinted that the overall situation was “losing” the district some “staff”:

I would say that the district has not provided any guidance.... um, other than what we hear at school board meetings, you know. “We don’t teach this, we don’t teach that, we don’t encourage this, we don’t.” But there’s nothing that’s –there’s no clear policy. I kind of feel like the superintendent’s office thinks it’s just going to blow over, and so they don’t want to make policy. But I don’t think they’re right. I don’t think it’s going to blow over, I think it’s going to stay for a while... All the discussion about race and about sexuality and things that we never really-- I mean they were there, but we never really had to like address on a daily basis. And we are.... we are losing staff.

Other educators described how multi-level pressures combining state policy pressure and local parent activity tapping national talking points affected local district and school leaders’ actions. A district equity officer, a Black woman in a liberal, rapid change, racially mixed/majority white district in North Carolina, had talked on our survey in summer 2021 about recent conflict campaign activity in her district:

House Bills, FOIA requests, a website set up by the lieutenant governor for parents to report on indoctrination; parents asking for their students not to do SEL lessons; questions about CRT and SEL to principals...No real response. The district wants to do an equity campaign to explain what equity is.

We then interviewed her in June 2022. At the time, North Carolina had two bills introduced, including one seeking to restrict public K-12 schools from

“any instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3 curricula” and to enforce parent notification of any pronoun changes for students; it had passed the state house/senate and was pending. She also described in more detail the “indoctrination website” run by the lieutenant governor of the state, where anyone could “report people”:

I’ve heard I’m in there. It’s so big. That is, no way I can find myself... it’s like 1000 pages because ...you can send any complaint that you have that you feel like your child is being indoctrinated.

Her interview indicated how local conflict campaigning *in* this state context, and local leaders’ capitulation to those campaigners, made a tiny vocal minority of angry “white people” seem far larger than it actually was. She noted first how a failure to speak up for students of color in race-related learning had led to the current moment also emphasizing LGBTQ focused restrictions:

It is the exact same people who organized around CRT that have now organized around LGBTQ. And ... you know, there’s a lot of people who are aware about the “don’t say gay” type stuff, but who were quiet when a lot of the CRT stuff was happening. And ... if you had spoke up and like squashed it then, they may not have had the momentum that now....To me that’s the evolution of it.

She then described ongoing efforts to silence race related work in the district. For one, “Any company that we partner with, they do these like background checks andthat’s when CRT will come up, like, oh this organization wrote this about CRT.” Local agitators were also aggressively wielding national talking points, including in meetings where she and other women of color were visibly representing the District. “The Proud Boys come to our board meetings,” she said, adding of one meeting, “when I looked around it was just four people of color and we were all females in the district”:

We used to hold board meetings at schools, sometimes, and ...we had one at a school and the Proud Boys came. And there was a

Black Lives Matter flag and an LGBTQ flag, and they were like shouting out like, “why are those flags bigger than the American flag?” and, “Black Lives Matter is racist!” andthings like that.

Some local parents also had recently objected to a district “equity audit,” even while students joining focus groups and taking a voluntary survey had their parents’ permission. “They act like they are speaking for this vast majority of parents, ‘we don’t want this for our kids in this district,’” she said. But when she had reviewed her survey’s details, “[with] middle and high school parents [it was] less than 1% of parents, [who] didn’t want their kids to take it”:

And I said, “and so we are dancing for1%?!” And I said, “and what about the voices of the 99%?” Like we never lean into them, we always lean into this less than 1%, and let them dictate what we’re going to do. (...) the reality is, they *don’t* speak for all parents, they speak for a minority of parents. They’re just well organized, that’s what it is.

Asked about the small number of parents leading local campaigns to shut down such work, she mused, “They’re all white people.” “What drew them in... it was like talk about masks and talk about vaccines,” she added, “...[and then,] ‘Oh, and that CRT stuff too’”:

What we also realized is that some of them don’t even have kids in the district. So when I say they’re well organized, what they do is they go around from state to state, board meeting to board meeting, grabbing those few parents and making it look like, “here again, there’s so much more of us.”

She added that loud intimidation by these “few parents” had a real effect because the local board capitulated to them. “Anytime I see people who are really about equity, BIPOC, they’re like ‘we have been *waiting* to have these conversations,’” she explained. However, she said, local parents “in favor of equity” “haven’t spoken up a lot,” possibly due to “just assuming that everything is okay” and not fully “understanding” campaigners’ “internal”

effects on the district. She noted how amidst national and state-driven pressures, a previously “supportive” “board” was currently saying “no” to “the work” as a way of “comforting” this tiny localized minority at the expense of “99% of families” in the district:

I felt like we had a board that was overall, supportive of the work. But I felt like it just was always “no, we have to... no, we can’t do this.” I just, so, felt like the comfort of white people was always on the table....if it was just you know, “let’s make it palatable for different groups of white parents,” okay I don’t have a problem with that. But when it’s at the *expense* of Black students, Latino students, LGBT students, and parents who are *for* all of that [equity], then it’s like...what are we even doing at this?

She also described how her own district colleagues were starting to “shut down” even her own district professional development work supporting leaders simply “to learn how to connect with their student groups.” Higherups had cut short one PD experience she led after a colleague reported, “someone said they think that you think they’re racist.” She mused that this was perhaps an “out” for district colleagues who were “looking for a way to get out” of starting such work in the first place. Her own superintendent had even refused recently to let her show a video titled “Things that white people don’t know” (featuring a Black woman “just talking about like some elements of Black culture that people just don’t understand”) internally just to the leadership of the district. “I wanted to show a snippet of the video ...so that we could kind of have a discussion around ‘so were you aware of that,... how do we address that?’” she said. “And ... all that was seen by the superintendent was the title and she was like “No. We can’t watch it.”

District administrators above her had also asked her to stop meeting with Black parents discussing improvements to student support, “until further notice.” (“They told me not to meet with [the] parents anymore,” she said bluntly.) In a ripple of silencing, she added that teachers acting as school level “Equity leads” were also starting to silence

themselves given a perceived lack of support above them in the face of local intimidation:

Equity leads... expressed... like there is no support. Like we are going back to our schools to do the work, and no one is accountable. So we're just trying to do this by ourselves.... there was also that people were scared....[by] what was going on on the outside. People were afraid to lose their jobs. People weren't sure that they were going to be supported by the district. They were afraid parents were going to, like, send them these crazy emails.

One teacher in her district had been smeared in a “conservative newspaper” after attempting some anti-racist professional development in his school. She noted the need for support “above” both him and herself, saying, “when stuff like that would happen, ... I have to wrap support around the staff, they have to know that ‘I support you, I have your back.’” While higherups at the district expected her to convey support to teachers for them, she noted, teachers needed to feel “that everyone *above* me supports them.”

Looming multi-level threat without broader district or Board “support” left local teachers not teaching race related materials out of fear, she said. She described how at the beginning of the 2022 school year, “the social studies teachers were concerned...to even like, join in with equity stuff. ... They have been censoring themselves”:

The equity leads go back and do PD in their buildings...they may ...say, you know, use these resources to discuss... Black Lives Matter in school at the beginning of February. And you know, teachers [are] just being like, “I'm not going to touch that, mmm.” Because they don't know what's gonna happen.... like they'll get like this onslaught of emails from people. They have seen people go like straight over everyone's head and go straight to the board. (...) The [teacher] whose name and everything got sent to this conservative newspaper, they have seen that happen. Nobody wants that, you know. So now you Google his name and

that's what comes up, right? They've seen that ...That's what I think that they're concerned about.

She also noted effects on students themselves, whom she talked to in her district capacity. “When the Proud Boys came... to one of the high schools....The kids ... felt like after it happened, the district said nothing. ... ‘we were scared and y'all said nothing,’” she voiced. Students had described teachers too afraid to support students even in experiences of peer harassment, “like racial comments that are said, or homophobic comments ... and how teachers don't say anything...because of everything we just discussed.”

In the ultimate silencing, this equity officer too had just resigned from her own job, “given everything.” She added, “[I was] told... ‘we don't want you back’ type of thing.” She concluded by emphasizing the simultaneous role of districts and parents, in her case inside a restriction-leaning state:

I'm one of many equity officers across the country who has resigned or been not renewed, or that position has been terminated or whatever.A parent said to me, “I think we've been too quiet.” ...And I think that parent was processing how ...the 99% have *not* spoken up. ...For me, the conclusion is, can't sleep on this stuff.

Educators described how when local parents supportive of race talk and LGBTQ-support talk were “quiet” and districts did not explicitly “support,” local decisions prioritized loud, sometimes tiny minorities of critics – and board meetings themselves became dominated by people seeking to silence race and gender/sexuality talk via national or state tactics of intimidation. One white teacher who worked in a predominantly white, liberal-leaning school district in Connecticut, a state without bills, had a large personal educator network in another predominantly white, liberal-leaning community where he lived in nearby Rhode Island. (Rhode Island had a failed bill in 2021 and three more bills introduced in February 2022.) In his 2021 survey, while describing both districts, this teacher had described teachers “[fearing] being the next one to be attacked publicly for teaching about

race. [Some] avoid these topics because of this.” In his 2022 interview, he described more specifically how in Connecticut, a few “concerned” parents had been asking questions at board meetings about whether some books were anti-police. But in Rhode Island, state politicians pushing state bills, plus “national groups” shaping such legislation and inflaming individuals, differently shaped the teaching context:

We have a representative who was introducing bills saying we cannot talk about divisive concepts in schools. We can't talk about —basically now, we have our own form of the “don't say gay” bill here in Rhode Island...[and] networking across the state of Rhode Island ... certainly seems like it's coming from, you know, higher sources or national groups.

Inflamed local individuals helped effectuate this broader state and nationally networked threat. On his survey in 2021, this teacher had mentioned a man in this Rhode Island community calling for firing teachers, making a “FOIA request for any district staff emails w/ words ‘race, racism, George Floyd, critical race theory,’ and offering a resolution to the school committee to prohibit the teaching of ‘divisive topics’” (this later failed to pass). When we spoke to this educator in April 2022, he clarified that the man was continuing to “stir the pot” in the RI district’s school board meetings, calling for limiting learning on both race and now, gender and sexuality, particularly transgender experiences. “And concerns about curriculum...materials being used in the classroom”:

One person in particular for over a year now has spoken at every board meeting ... One of his latest tactics [is] you know, try to draw attention and make a very bold statement. So, he read excerpts from the book *Gender Queer*; [that] has been a topic of a lot of book bans. He said this book is available in the [RI] high school library. And then he had giant posters made up with some graphic images from the book and had people holding them up behind him as he was speaking at the meeting, which is televised. And *very* focused on ...stirring the

pot, getting people to just hear little sound bites and not telling the whole story.

And the school committee in [RI], for example, it said, “we’ve heard you come and talk about this one book now for three months, but we’ve asked you to fill out the form that [formally raises] a concern about a book...And you haven’t filled out the form, but you keep coming back.” And so ...he just wants to stir the pot. He did the ... freedom of information requests and asked for—It would have amounted to like, you know, 10,000 documents, with ...a long list of words, so any emails or documents containing these words like “Race. Racism, George Floyd.”... You know, on and on and on and on....And he will not stop. And he has a very committed following.

The teacher described how the local conflict campaigner also was wielding media to pressure restriction and target individuals:

[He writes] letters to the editor just about every week, and he’s calling for the firing of various staff members in [town], including the superintendent, assistant superintendent. And [he] keeps repeating things that are lies, basically, or not the whole story, and he just keeps repeating them. And he has people that believe everything he says, and he’s gaining traction sort of across the state as well. Like he’s connected with other like minded people from other towns in Rhode Island. All the meetings are very intense.it’s more like what you might see on the news...just really negative and really draining, I think, on the school committee members to participate. ..It’s just a lot of nonsense and [misinformation]— you know, not portraying accurately what’s really happening in schools.

He noted how these multilevel pressures touched down at the teacher level, as fear of “being called out” “personally” by the loud individual or his allies in this broader context was making educators “just afraid” to talk in class or share books with students:

Teachers, I know, in [the RI town] are just afraid. Like there's a culture of fear now, and now— who's going to be called out next, if you say or do something wrong or somebody finds a book in your room that somebody finds objectionable. And he makes it very personal and does personal attacks on teachers and administrators....where's that's not happening in [CT] where I work.

In a fear context, a lack of proactive “administrator support” in the Rhode Island district particularly left teachers “afraid” and not able to “teach what I want to teach”:

There's certainly teachers that come to those board meetings, and you know support each other. But they're also ... definitely afraidlike I've had teachers say, “I wish I was working in your town [in CT] and I'd be able to teach what I want to teach.” And I think that's part of it, too. In [CT] we do have a history of teachers who have a lot of autonomy, and in general administrators support teachers, you know. I don't think there's been a history of, like, teachers being thrown under the bus. You know it may have happened here and there, but it's-- in general I think teachers feel supported.

He described further how his Connecticut district administrators sent “strong messages of support” to educators and explanations to the public, such that “I don't feel like any [CT] teachers feel sort of threatened by anything that's happening”:

The one thing that maybe has made a difference [in his CT district], is that leadership really has sent strong messages of support and done a lot to sort of, say, this is what we're doing, this is why we're doing it. This is what we're doing when we train teachers, and what we're talking about in a staff development, or, this is what these committees are doing. And they have websites and they explain – “this is why we're committed to this, this is why it's important. And we support diversity/equity/inclusion.” And I don't

know if that's happening as much from the leadership in [RI].

Still, he also described how relatively supportive school level leaders could still waver amidst restriction efforts, themselves threatening student support. In his Connecticut district, one parent had “objected very strongly to” the book *Ghost Boys* being used by a teacher, possibly representing state or town police families “defensive about any kind of anything associated with Black Lives Matter, I guess.” And at his own school, which was “close to 95% white, I'd say” and felt “much more homogeneous, you know, racially, economically” than the district in Rhode Island, his principal had just prohibited a sign made by students for a student-sparked “Alliance for Acceptance” club he advised:

To get [the club] started, we made some posters and printed them out in color. ...[saying] this is what we stand for... learning about diversity and educating ourselves and others about diversity. And then we put some symbols on the flag, like the Gay Pride symbol. One student has a disability so there's a disability flag, symbol on the poster, and a few others. But one of the symbols was the Black power symbol, like the fist. And so, just two weeks ago, there was a parent in the school for a PTO meeting, just like the first time they actually had it in person. And the parent saw the poster and had a problem with the Black fist, said it was a divisive symbol, it's anti police and it's associated with Black Lives Matter, and that it should not be hanging on posters in our school.

So I thought we had the support of our principal....but I was disappointed. A couple days later he sent an email saying I had to take down all the posters, and the club should design their own logo and not use any other symbols on the logo.

The teacher pointed out how the administrator's “censoring” of inclusive language translated into educators' inability to “teach about” acceptance itself with students:

So I was not happy with that. And my co advisors and I, we drafted a letter that we're planning on giving to the principal...can we sit and talk about this more and have a conversation? Can we maybe invite this parent in to talk about misconceptions? and, like our club is all about learning and educating ourselves around this topic. And if we're going to not have symbols on our poster that— how can we teach about them? And acknowledging that, yeah, we could make improvements to our poster, certainly, but we shouldn't be censoring it.

The teacher emphasized how a school leader had caved to just “one parent’s” critique:

It concerns me that basically one parent who had a concern, and to them this symbol was divisive, and without any dialogue whatsoever the decision was made, we need to take down all the posters. So, that's troubling because up until now, I would have said, my district is really doing a great job.

Multiple educators in 2022 described both school and district leaders silencing efforts in reaction to a “vocal minority” of campaigners attempting to restrict, often describing small groups or individuals that were frequent, loud, and sometimes highly organized by state or national organizations in leveraging a broader restrictive threat. In a multi-district, overall racially mixed/majority white Midwestern metropolitan region in a state with bills pending, an equity consultant, an African-American woman, described how a district had halted a summer pilot on teaching literature, explaining their cancellation as “because we're getting too much pushback”:

one of my larger districts ... had pulled together a culturally responsive instruction around literacy. And they had six or seven Freedom of Information requests from [a state-focused conservative research organization]. So it frightened them and their teachers, and there was a lot of

pushback from their community now... [one] group, lot of shakers and movers, mobilized and they told [the district], “no more, I don't want my child looking at those books.”

She described her region as combining districts with “old money wealth” and “diversity” that were “always in war with each other,” but she explained that it was still just a “small group of people” locally leveraging a broader wave of restriction effort. “What I think is scaring people is the frequency” of “opposition,” she said:

I think the better metric is the frequency. A small group of people that have coalesced, but they frequently come to the board. They're frequent in their levels of putting up the opposition. They'll come to the board -- they'll hear about a curriculum meeting, they'll voice their concern about that. If an issue happens at a school they rally very quickly.

She described these “frequent” critics as, “I would say upper middle class...and higher class white people, pretty much Trumpite you know. ...And ...they seem to be organized and scripted. And very much it's like, “don't let anything go by without you saying something about [it]” -- lodging that kind of opposition. So I think that's what scares ... the schools.” District leaders were also “scared” and stepping back, she said; one superintendent was now “abandoning” and “disowning” her own DEI support efforts.

Others described district and school leaders effectively discontinuing efforts through local “silence” about prior “DEI” efforts. In New Hampshire (where two bills died, but an amendment was signed into law by the Governor in June 2021), one white female teacher we surveyed in 2021 had described her district “going silent” on “DEI initiatives” that had previously been celebrated:

Since parents began to protest “CRT,” attack my work and a new law was passed about not teaching people are “inherently racist” the district has basically gone silent about [equity and diversity initiatives “ramped up”

in 2020] ... This put a huge sad dark cloud over my effort to support DEI initiatives in my district and beyond. Many people just don't want to touch it now so the extremists are in a sense winning.

In 2022, educators notably described higher-ups going silent like this on efforts to support students of color in states where restriction legislation was pending, as well as passed. A white female teacher in a rapid change, conservative, racially mixed/majority white district in Indiana (a state where 8 bills were filed by January 2022, then defeated) had described on the 2021 survey a combination of state and local pressures, noting how the "state's attorney general moved to enact legislation, parent complained to school boards." She had noted back then how local leaders started to "pull away" from key "terms":

There's been no real response (as far as I'm aware) by any higher-ups in my corporation, but I have noticed a pull away from using terms like "culturally responsive" and "social-emotional learning." I think what they've settled on to refer to everything related to those terms/ideas is "brain aligned teaching" (insert eye roll...)

She also had indicated that she was limiting topics she discussed in class, saying, "I'm scared!...I have more anxiety about teaching certain things."

When interviewed in spring 2022, she described how her principal had just halted previously supported work on remedying racially disparate discipline. In 2021, educators had received a grant to address racial disparities in a school and district where Black students were over-disciplined (the school was "15% Black but 85% of your office referrals are black," the teacher said) and underrepresented in "gifted" classes. To avoid "backlash" in the current moment, her principal "shut down" the work:

Part of our data showed a pretty noticeable difference in the race of students who were sent to the office—predominantly black and brown kids, and so we were attempting to revamp our PBIS system through a

culturally responsive lens. ... Some teachers and our behavior Dean did a bunch of PD, and you know came back with all these really great ideas. And our principal kind of shut down—he did not want us to use the term "culturally responsive," because he didn't want questions, he didn't want backlash. He was just like, "that's not what we're going to call it, and we're not going to come at it from that lens." ... It was really hard to create change and get people on board when we were not allowed to have certain conversations.

This teacher detailed how her principal "is non confrontational and I don't think that he wanted to ruffle feathers and cause conflicts." Yet her administrator's silencing of "conversations" was ending an effort to support students themselves:

We eventually got to the point where we were like "OK, what can we call it? Like we're just going to rename it." And he's just like, "We're not doing that. No."

She herself also was experiencing pressure from some local parents inflamed by a sequence of national campaigns. "From what I've seen in the board meetings, it was mostly about masks," she said, adding, "in my classroom ... the way it started it was unrelated to curriculum, but they got mad at something that happened, and then they kind of like ramped up into questioning my curriculum... that was like antiracist type inspired." In her rapidly diversifying district, she had been on a learning journey to teach about race more skillfully ("I used to teach [about] Native Americans seven years ago, when I taught first grade, and it was like bad"). Since the Floyd protests, she had been actively preparing herself to be able to discuss race and racism: "all the white people, we were really like, *How to Be an Antiracist* and like I did all of it, I was like 'yeah, I'm totally in guys,'" she said, noting additionally of her school, "I might be the only one who is pushing the boundaries or who's even thinking about it... I don't think anybody is doing it." She was now shutting down this learning out of fear of "mistakes" that now felt more fatal professionally:

I make a lot of mistakes, and I think that's part of what I'm supposed to be doing is making mistakes, and learning from that. I think that's something that's hard for teachers, because sometimes, like, you don't get to make mistakes. Like one mistake and you're out. And so that's what's scary – people don't acknowledge that, like I'm still learning how to be the best teacher.

She was ending discussion opportunities for her students simultaneously. In class recently, she had chosen not to prepare students for talking about race and identity before an American Revolution unit. She also was retreating from her previous efforts to prepare to answer questions that students had about LGBTQ families and LGBTQ terminology. One student had asked recently what “transgender” meant, leading to a 10-minute straightforward discussion about gender (“it wasn't like I was like ‘okay guys today we're going to talk about transgender’ and whatever, it was a situation that happened”). Some parents had become upset, arguing that they didn't think it was a teacher's place to explain those things and that being transgender was against their religion. After some back and forth with the parents, she finally asked her principal for backup. The parents met alone with the principal, but she never heard anything about the exchange, leaving her unclear about what she could now do safely. The situation had scared her enough that she decided to not talk about such topics further in class. The teacher described her overall retreat amidst this combination of pressures, where local parents could “threaten legal” and administrative support remained unclear:

It's so hard, because I feel like all it would take is for one really bad thing for [the principal] to be likenot one bad thing that I would do, but like one parent to really, really, really be angry and like threaten legal.... For basically my career to be over.

Given her principal's lack of guidance in the face of silencing pressure from multiple levels, the teacher now described her plans to talk only “reactively” about race in class:

But ...I don't know, I *think* if I continue to use the standards to support my curriculum decisions he's gonna trust me. And I found ways to--not be sneaky about it, but to not make it like overtly “today we're going to talk about race.” I will just choose a text that has this as a theme kind of, and it will kind of naturally lead to these conversations. And if I'm like, “this was student-led, they asked these questions, and I was just there as a facilitator,” I think that I could be more reactive, if you will.

Some teachers thus waited with increased trepidation for students to start discussions, instead of starting dialogues themselves as professionals. At these moments, educators stepped back to no longer talk as openly or proactively as before. We called this version of talking, getting *subdued*.

Subdued

Some educators described hiding or “pausing” their own student support work in reaction to active shutdown from above. The equity director from the contested, rapid change, racially mixed district in Colorado described how after “our Board was flipped after the election” and an equity-focused superintendent left, “I paused the equity work with our volunteers, because it felt really disrespectful to their time, not knowing what direction these [newly elected Board] candidates were going to go in, considering how they campaigned.” Later in the interview she also indicated that open “equity” work had essentially “stopped since the election”:

There's a lot of stuff that's ...being moved underground....So we are embedding the work in places where it's harder to find it. So when I leave and even when this [equity] office is closed, the work can continue. So it's like, it's gone underground, it's ...but.... yeah....In essence, the work has been stopped since the election.

Other teachers described how without supportive local leadership, the conflict campaign could subdue talk even inside supportive states. A white female teacher who described her California community as “becoming more Hispanic” (the

district had been very rapidly changing and was now 20% white, and politically contested) described local critics now using national conflict campaign “buzzwords” targeting any talk about race or ethnicity in education as unacceptable “CRT”:⁸

I had a colleague recently say that they had assigned a Sandra Cisneros poem, and the parent called and complained that she was teaching CRT. This was in Language Arts, it wasn't even in a history class. But they came with the “CRT.” To me that tells me that they're watching stuff and hearing these kind of buzzwords and just ...going after teachers.

She noted how even inside a state that actually was starting to require ethnic studies, localized “conservative” reaction to “demographic changes” mixed with local anxiety over “critical race theory” was creating “a lot of pushback” and increased fear about “going there” in discussing race-related topics in history:

I feel like my school is um... We don't even talk about it. You know, it sort of feels like I have to be careful. It's a pretty conservative area that's definitely—there's some demographic changes. It's becoming more Hispanic. I see a lot of pushback. There's anger. I don't know... I think it's “afraid”... The teachers won't even talk about it.

In fact, I was telling my principal that I was interested in doing ethnic studies because it's mandated 2025, we got to do it for a semester, and he didn't even realize that the law has been passed. So I think that people are avoiding. They don't want to get in trouble or pushback from parents. You know what I mean? I've heard colleagues say things, like in my department, like “I just don't even want to go there,” you know. Some people will—like I will—but... I won't say “critical race theory” or anything, I'm just teaching history and just covering stuff and the kids can hear the facts and then have their own opinion about it, you know. But it definitely feels like it's touchy. It's pretty conservative... and... yeah.

Without a public message of support from “leadership,” she said, other teachers in her school were refusing to discuss current events (including the January 6 insurrection) and self-muting even regarding racially explicit student-student harassment in their own school:

The teachers are afraid to piss anyone off, so they just ... avoid talking about things, because they don't feel that they would be supported or defended if the parents were to complain.

Asked what would be most helpful to teachers feeling such intimidation, she noted,

I think if there was maybe a message from our leadership that we are able—that those things are okay to talk about. When you know that your leadership is pretty conservative and that the powers that be in the community are as well, it's just kind of this no-go zone. But maybe if [leadership was] vocal about it— like “it's OK!”

As here, some educators were subdued through administrative failure to clarify that talk was “OK.” Others were subdued when administrators directly cautioned them to now try to avoid specific subjects. Texas is a state with a law passed in June 2021 barring *The 1619 Project* and teaching of various race-related concepts, while enforcing the teaching of all sides of any “controversial” issue. In a conservative, majority students of color (47% white) Texas district where the percentage of white students had rapidly decreased, an elementary teacher noted on our 2021 survey that district counsel had been cautioning to avoid “controversial” issues altogether:

We were told verbally during a PowerPoint presentation with the district counsel that we should avoid any controversial issues.... My colleagues are shying away from teaching anything in history or social studies that could be offensive.

Some spring 2022 educators similarly described a higher-up cautioning them to avoid race-related talk

and learning in official restriction states. In a racially mixed/majority white, contested district in New Hampshire, for example (a state where the governor in June 2021 signed into law an amendment banning the teaching of specific concepts), a white teacher had clicked “no” and “NA” on most questions about restrictions on our survey in 2021. When we interviewed her in April 2022, she described “something put out by like the head of schools in New Hampshire who did say we should basically not talk about it [critical race theory].” She actually googled the state’s current legal situation during our Zoom interview to find out its formal status.

Her interview indicated how local actors, including a school leader in her “more suburban area –mainly white, middle to upper class,” had *effected* the state restriction context. She described how a parent in her school had complained after a white educator’s poorly communicated tease of a white student, where the student went home feeling “bad” about being white. The principal had then cautioned staff in a staff-wide memo, which the teacher paraphrased as saying, “‘if you don’t have to bring race into it then don’t bring race into it’.” The teacher added in our interview, “Like, how do you do that if you’re teaching about American slavery?!” She now called it “weird” to get a “newsletter” from the administration, “That essentially was saying.... don’t make white kids feel bad for being white.” She added, “Like I don’t want my kids to feel bad for being white, but I also don’t want to not talk about truths of history because of that”:

I think mostly people are upset, mostly people are like...this is silly! Like, ...how are you supposed to teach history ...and then even people who don’t generally teach history were still kind of like, that’s not right. And I think the [school’s] director was also kind of agreeing with that. But she’s like, “this is sort of the mandate that’s come down from the state, because we don’t want angry parents calling us saying that we’re saying their children are racist basically.”

She added that the director’s cautions about “the mandate that’s come down from the state” asked

educators to talk in more muted ways in class, including about overtly racist historical events:

All she sort of clarified was, like, try to, like, keep your personal opinions out of it. Like I said, probably most of our staff is pretty liberal... But like, I don’t really feel like it’s a personal opinion that slavery is wrong.

This teacher noted that even as “I feel like people kind of kept just doing what they were doing,” “maybe, people just are feeling more cautious, like, ‘should I say this, or should I not say.’” She said she herself planned to persist in talking about race, noting that she was experienced enough to do so: “I don’t think it’s an issue as much for me because I sort of just naturally ---well....I’ve been trained to do that.”

Other teachers indicated how their own experience in diversity-related teaching had them “cautiously” subduing rather than fully silencing such work. In 2021, an experienced white female teacher in a demographically stable, racially mixed/majority white, conservative district in Kentucky— a state with bills at the time – had admitted that “I may reevaluate some of my text selections in my English classes. We are a single-income household ... I cannot risk getting fired because of the books I teach.” By spring 2022, a law was passed demanding alignment with prescribed ideas about race, sex, and history, after a governor’s veto was overridden by the legislature in April 2022. She now elaborated:

I very intentionally choose a pretty diverse set of authors for the text sets and mentor texts that I choose for my class. And that’s true really of our whole English department, the school. I do think that I am going to be a little bit more cautious about the way that I word things, because even though it’s not to the point that I’m willing to change my curriculum, I am not also not trying to invite problems in my life. So I think I’ll be a little more cautious about how I talk about certain issues.

She now detailed her fear of even having a visible display of books “supporting perspectives of”

LGBTQ/students of color, while she said she was not quite taking such books away:

I do worry a little bit because if you look around my room, very visibly you can see, books that are ... You know, supporting perspectives of the LGBT community or students of color ... I mean I'm not going to change my books or my curriculum. I'm going to try to be a little more cautious but I will be honest, it does worry me. Like... it's something that I now have in the back of my mind that I didn't really worry about before.

She indicated that an experienced teacher could stay the course somewhat in discussing issues of race and diversity despite such fear. In contrast, she said, new teachers or teachers beginning to discuss such issues for the first time were far more likely to fully self-censor given potential threat of repercussions. Such teachers needed experienced colleagues and “supportive administrators” to back them up as they built skills in talking about race and gender:

I think that where we will see the impact is on our young English teachers coming into the profession. I worry about English teachers not having supportive administrators, not having, you know, colleagues in their department, who can take some of the heat for them so that they're able to make those kinds of choices as well. So I worry about that, about how it's going to transform the kind of education that students get moving forward. And to be honest with you, the last month has been really difficult...the legislation came out of our last legislative period--not just in the way that it impacts education, but the way that it impacts all kinds of things.

Even as she was “a little more cautious” in her particular district, she herself was now thinking of eventually leaving the state:

I'm not feeling very hopeful right now. And I also don't feel very hopeful about wanting to remain in this state after my kids grow up. I don't feel like it's a safe place for all people. And so I'm not sure if I'm the kind of

person who stays and fights or if I'm the kind of person who peaces out, you know. I guess I'm about to-- I'll be learning that over the next decade.

She mused more on how critics “examining everything you do...and say” linked to a statewide teacher shortage:

There aren't a lot of advantages today to go into teaching in Kentucky...because you can make more money elsewhere, you don't have to deal with people wanting to examine everything that you do, everything that you say. You don't have to deal with any of the negative stuff. ... and that's too bad, because we do have a teacher shortage in our state.

While this teacher was negotiating passed law, some educators were feeling exhausted even in progressive areas within states with pending bills, if they had to spend substantial time negotiating with even one parent “questioning” “everything I do.” The Ohio teacher working in a moderately changing liberal district (what she called “a very, very, very white community”), had said on our 2021 survey that in a state with bills pending, “We have to spend personal time fighting against their attacks on honesty in education.” Now, in 2022, she explained this draining of time even in a “pretty supportive district”:

This is the first year I've had significant pushback from a single parent, because we are in a pretty supportive district. So I feel like I'm lucky that I only have one parent, but she's pretty persistent. (...) I wouldn't call it censorship.... this particular parent isn't trying to remove certain texts. She just questions everything I do, and like my intentionality behind all of the things that we read and discuss. But I would say censorship isn't happening in our district. Like it is in some others.

The teacher described the time both teachers and school leaders sank into interactions with even one such parent, versus teaching:

She emails me and I have to share. Curriculum overview, she wanted daily lesson plans. And I said that was unreasonable. And so I don't do that. She asks for justification, I answer those questions. And there's a certain point where I tell my principal, I've done a reasonable amount. And I'm done. And he sort of takes over.

Ohio had three bills pending, restricting teaching of specific race-related texts or concepts and also any instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity before third grade. This teacher said that since educators might now “say something that could get the district in trouble legally,” local administrators also were spending substantial work hours reviewing responses to parents to “make sure that we're not saying anything that could make the situation worse”:

Our union got involved because of how much extra work certain parents were asking teachers to do... like, a parent emails, you respond. And then the administration wants to help draft emails back, to make sure that we're not saying anything that could make the situation worse, or say something that could get the district in trouble legally, or something like that.and there's a point where it becomes too much. And then administrators take over and meet with the parents.... So ...we don't have to change our curriculum, but we've been told that we do have to share anything that they asked for. But we don't have to make any changes based on their opinions of what we share.

This teacher added that while a “lot more” community members supportive of diversity efforts went unheard, an “extreme minority” monopolized educators’ time:

I would say they're an extreme minority in my district. And they are very loud and persistent. And despite— I've answered every single question, at length. My principal's met with her, or superintendent has met with them, like.... and it just, it doesn't matter what we say, or [what] I feel likeshe's

still going to be very, very vocal all the time. And it's only one parent. And the problem is, I know that there are a lot more community members and parents who are supportive of these things, but we don't hear from them. We only hear from this really small group of parents.

She noted that in her classroom teaching in this context, “I've been a little bit more careful because I have, I know, eyes on me.” She was continuing more work in a club “outside of the classroom,” keeping conversation about “increasing diversity and inclusion in our school” going more for the subset meeting outside of class:

Yeah, so I'm a little bit more careful about what we talk about specifically in my class. But um, that [student antiracism club] group allows for more targeted work outside of the classroom, so students who are interested in fighting those things, or increasing diversity and inclusion in our school, can do that, have the opportunity to.

Some educators thus continued dialogue about diversity and inclusion only with the willing.

Other 2022 educators described taking on leadership roles in their schools, districts, and communities and explicitly *speaking up* to counter restriction effort with an insistence on the educational right to talk, learn, and read about race and diversity. Essentially, they were modeling the supports other educators wished were available.

Speaking up

On our 2021 survey, many educators had called for leaders and supporters to more proactively protect learning through public guidance and messaging, saying that “Educators need to hear from school/union leadership clearly/explicitly what their freedoms are to address topics” and that leaders should be “Really talking about what it is that we're doing” to the public, in educators’ own terms. Some praised district administrators who were explicitly offering what we have elsewhere called “system backup” (Pollock et al., 2022b), as in “an emailed affirmation of our right to discuss controversial

issues in our classrooms”; “language and reassurance” for anxious school leaders; and district statements “stating local values.” 2021 educators also noted the importance of community members speaking up to support, noting that “the presence at board meetings of ‘anti-CRT’ voices may not be representative of the community at large.” “We gathered students, parents, and teachers to speak at the board meeting on the harms any resolution on CRT would cause. The board elected to take no action on the resolution,” said one teacher. After local “Letters to the editor,” said another, “The school board responded by approving new vision and mission statements that included equity for all students.”

2022 educators described other successes in speaking up, sometimes articulating explicitly the types of supports for talking that leaders themselves needed to protect race and diversity-related work amidst the conflict campaign.

In the diverse Midwestern metropolitan community, with two state bills pending, the Black equity consultant who had described local critics as a “frequent” “white” “small group of people that have coalesced” to ban specific books and PD described how she had started to focus on supporting local educators to keep talking, more clearly than ever, about what they were actually doing:

So they called me, and I worked with their departments. And I said, “so let's look at what the pushback is saying.” And so what we did was, we held sessions around the school district to talk about what they *were* doing. I said hmm, first help them understand what critical race theory is, but lean heavily into what *you're* doing, which is culturally responsive teaching. And so I said, so let's pool our support.

She emphasized supporting leaders to learn to publicly articulate their goals and efforts, in order to “persevere” as critics were “creating a lot of fog and distraction and fear.” “I have to really support districts that are really holding the course,” she said, “because it will be very easy for them to abandon it.” “It's shifted my practice,” she added. “Before, it was just getting people to understand the work.

Now, it's getting people to understand and persevere through the work.”

She described coaching local leaders to “articulate five talking points about this work that you want to always be able to come out of your mouth.” She also urged the leaders to use the unions as bulwark, noting, “I think the thing really protecting teachers and their right to teach what they need to teach in their classroom right now, is our union.” Pending restrictive legislation was also “really what's driving” educators’ anxieties, she said; one teacher had told her recently that “I really want to leave this profession, because I have to have the freedom to teach in my classroom.” She called for both unions and local leadership to back up teachers “vulnerable” in such a context, even wishing that the two major unions would combine their strengths rather than work separately:

It's the system that's pushing down on [teachers], and they know they can't fight it as an individual. They need a *system* that can say, “I'm standing behind you, this is what I stand for.” And that's why I think... I said to [my supervisor], “do you think we could bring the unions together and talk with them about ways in which they support?” ... because both the NEA and the AFT have been vocal advocates... if [these two unions] came together, I think they'd have as loud of a voice as the opposition, and they [could] really support their teachers. Because right now, our teachers feel very vulnerable. That's the piece that concerns me particularly with a shortage of teachers, you know.

Leaders too needed to combine forces to persevere, she said, “to build the network” of educators supporting each other to protect the teaching, learning, and “DEI work” they believed in. Otherwise, the risk was that “We could have leaders flee for the hills, you know.”

In Michigan, a district director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, a Black man, described how in his own “majority white area, I think 80% white” (his district was indeed predominantly [90%] white, and conservative-leaning), some people just had

“reluctance” about DEI work, while “a very small minority of folks ... are like loud about like the resistance,” adding, “you know, the national –all the stuff you hear out there, it happens here too.” “National” “resistance” was echoed locally by “the same seven or eight people that show up” at monthly board meetings, which he called a “very small minority of folks that are loud.” The group had named themselves over COVID to fight “mask mandates,” then “CRT and DEI,” and now, he said, “LGBTQ ...is kind of at the forefront right now.”

On his 2021 survey, this educator had noted the state context for such local agitation:

The senate GOP members for the state of Michigan introduced a bill to ban teaching CRT and anything deemed "Anti-American." They outlined plans to reduce funding for school districts caught teaching such content after an investigation.....Social studies teachers are stressed out, and questioning whether the lesson plans covering various history projects will be attacked. I respond to several phone calls and emails a week addressing CRT concerns from community members. I am concerned about these groups going around and creating faux hysteria about CRT. They are purposefully lumping anything that has to do with DEI, Cultural responsiveness, SEL, under the CRT umbrella.

“We are battling misinformation. People rely too heavily on one source of information. In particular Fox News,” he had said in 2021, concluding,

I understand that this is just the next thing for the GOP in particular to create faux outrage about. It will pass. And we cannot let it deter us from the work of creating inclusive spaces where ALL feel safe, welcome, and loved.

When we spoke to him in 2022, the “faux outrage” had not yet “passed.” He said that local educators now needed support even for offering students voluntary “choice” of books with “LGBTQ characters...books that our students can see

themselves reflected in, books that offer them windows into other perspectives and experiences.” He was trying his best to “wrap supports around those educators who are leading” such K12 learning:

I have had to reassure all of our social studies teachers like just do your job, you know ..[and if] you get any trouble, do reach out to us and let us know so we can address it from our end, which we have not been great at honestly. [In] one instance, the teacher resigned. Another teacher went through some stuff, because things were posted on Facebook about what she was teaching in a class [he described her teaching about “The Harlem Renaissance and folks expressing themselves and being free in who they are.”]. And I think a lot is outside of my power -- I can’t go after somebody on Facebook, but I did talk to the teacher that was targeted and make sure she was okay. And you know, encouraged and affirmed the work she was doing.

Local youth were starting to organize as well, and he was ready to attend board meetings to support:

We’ve had folks at the board meeting attack ...groups at our schools that support the LGBTQ youth there. So again, just trying to wrap supports around those educators that are leading it, and just trying to...re-emphasize to our board, you know, like –that stuff hurts these kids. And so now we are hearing inklings of the next board meeting, some of these LGBTQ youth will be showing up in a public comment to ... speak out against stuff...and I’ll be there to support them and let them know that they have a right to exist.

We noted that crucially, this leader “wrap[ping] supports” around educators and youth “below” him in his system himself felt backed up locally as a leader when speaking up, by higher-level leaders “on board” with “DEI.” “Our Board is you know, on board with the DEI work,” he said. He also mentioned a “community foundation in town that I can lean on [and] bounce ideas around, so I never

feel like I'm doing it alone. And you know these folks also come with encouragement ...every time we meet.”

Other respondents cited state standards as backup for their ability to keep teaching on race and diversity issues, even as local and state-level conflict campaign activity threatened their work. In North Carolina, a white female high school social studies teacher had described on our 2021 survey a state-level website for parents to “snitch” on teachers,” in combination with “social media attacks, threatening emails, threats of job loss or fines” and “Parents demand[ing] cameras in class [to] see if teachers are indoctrinating.” In early May 2022, with two bills pending to restrict teaching about gender and sexual identity, a different middle school teacher in North Carolina, a man of color, now noted that in his liberal, racially mixed/majority white, rapid change district, he was seeing “pushback based on the current climate in the country,” adding that “I have not ever experienced pushback like I have”:

I see a lot of the similarities in what's happening in places like Texas, in Florida and Georgia. “We don't want you to bring this stuff up to our kids.” Now, the children are curious. They want to know everything. “Tell me this, tell me that. Why do they do this? Why did they do that?” So, the curiosity is still there. But I've noticed in parents ...that there's some pushback against not just teaching about race and equity, and gender equity and racial equity in the schools, but also, about even science.

In this moment, he said, the state standards could help educators continue to discuss key issues with children:

In North Carolina... both in social studies, and in science...you follow the standard course of study. You teach the concepts, the terms... the State tells us what to teach. And that's what I've done for 17 years. ...[in] the standard course of study for social studies in North Carolina...you do teach about the civil rights era. You do teach about slavery. You do teach about Reconstruction.

Still, he described how the effort to fulfill standards was becoming much harder amidst the conflict campaign. Even in the fairly “progressive” area where he taught in North Carolina, “it's almost like we're getting hidden messages from the children from their parents. ‘How are you doing this? Why are you teaching this way?’” He also noted parents “not knowing ...what Critical Race Theory is, because you don't teach that in middle school... but they think that's what we're doing. I don't know where they get this impression.” Conflict campaign activity was also threatening adult learning in his district. He served as a school “equity leader,” trying to spark conversation about student support issues including belonging for Black students (“they are not comfortable from the time they walk in the door until the time they get on the bus and go home”). He described “conservative” pushback he’d experienced personally after the district had asked school equity leaders to try a “21 day ...reflective practice of, you know, how much exactly do you know about equity? How much do you know about race? How much do you know about community and all this?”:

I ran that practice with our teachers, and a conservative blogger slammed me, accused me of teaching CRT to the students. Accused me of trying to, you know, ... trying to make everybody woke. And I mean it just came out of the blue, I mean... I've never been challenged by someone before on something, because I pride myself in knowing the content...[and] I didn't know we were there, you know, being in one of the so-called more progressive areas ... It was a shock to me...The blog is going around the community. And our school was somewhat villainized because of it. ...[and] it was shocking to see the response of the parents. Parents whom I've worked with. the mentality has changed.

He also mused, “You know, just like America is browning, our educational institutions are browning, and parents don't like it.” Still, he said he was going to continue to lean on the state standards to back up his right to explore “differences” in ideas and lived experiences:

Most of the censorship hasn't succeeded. Thank goodness...again, ... the politicians that we have are from a more progressive open bent. But there has been a tremendous amount of pressure on limiting, restricting books that relate to gender and gender equity, and the LGBTQ community.

....Again, those more conservative parents, who just like in those other states, who don't want their kids -- they don't want that discussion in the classroom. They don't want to talk about it ... You know, in looking at all the stuff on the news, I can only say that it's gonna make [children] think and they don't want them to think. They want them just to, you know, to revert back to this default of what their ideals are. And that's fine when you're at home. But again, there is a standard course in the state, North Carolina, and it allows for different explanations and explaining differences in people. It does allow for that.

Other teachers were speaking up through collective organizing in response to both state and local restriction effort. In his 2021 survey, the Rhode Island-based white teacher had said explicitly that,

The most important lesson I've learned is to speak up. Remaining silent when others are attacking educators is no longer an option. I've also learned that there are many people in my community who want to support teachers in the teaching of race, racism, and other uncomfortable topics. Joining a local organization gave me the resources and courage to speak up.

Referencing “Don’t Say Gay” style legislation now being introduced in Rhode Island, he described “various groups across the state that are trying to network...our sense is that the other side is very well organized now, and so we need to be organized ourselves to kind of prevent these things from happening.” He also was joining a “Stand Up for Racial Justice” antiracist organization, noting,

Getting involved in this work has been really wonderful in many ways. [I’m] just

kind of telling myself, “well, being on the sidelines isn't really going to help, so what am I going to do?” And so this was something that I could do. ... it's a little scary at first, but it's really worth it.

Other teachers were joining organizing outside of school. A Black teacher from a racially mixed/majority white, liberal district in Missouri, a state with many bills filed and defeated and one (at the time) still pending, explained that in class, “even the most innocent thing we say to them, it’s easy to be misconstrued as ‘Oh, they're trying to indoctrinate.’” So, she met with adults and youth “outside of the system” to talk about race issues:

So I have to do a lot of my work outside of the system...they've made it to where I almost have to put on all this armor just to do work. And ... The average [teacher is] gonna say forget it because they have enough going on in their lives. As if I don't.

She also noted that out-of-class workarounds for talking more openly about race were actually normal to her as a Black educator in a state like Missouri:

It depends on what state you're in. See for me, I'm like--OK, here's the thing as a Black woman. I'm used to having to do something different. I just am. I think a lot of our white progressive educators ... who are shocked, being told they got to do something different, like --people are not used to being redirected...White people are not used to having to be regulated, which is why there's so much pushback with those masks. ...Whereas, we're used to that. So for me to sit here and tell you I'm going to work outside the system? That sounds normal to me, and what people have always had to do. ...As a Black woman, I'ma have to work around it. ... I gotta figure out how to work around in a way that's safe for everybody, that's safer.

Such “work around” effort was “tactical because it is wise,” she noted. “You don't take a wound where you don't have to take one.”

In her generally supportive, liberal district (in a “very, very, very white community”) even inside a restriction-leaning state, the Ohio educator (a white woman) was also using her advisor role in an extracurricular club space to talk openly with students about looming state bills:

There's other things that are happening in our district outside of my classroom. So I'm an advisor for a [student antiracism group]. And it's another teacher and a collection of students who are working on different antiracism efforts outside of class. So we have a speaker series, we have movie nights, we bring students together and learn about these House bills and like activism nights, how you can make calls, email, write, testimony to testify at the hearings. So outside of the classroom, a lot more around that is happening. And our district also made diversity, equity and inclusion a part of their continuous improvement plan. So the administration is organizing professional development around that focus. So it is happening specifically in our district, as well as in my classroom.

While emphasizing the supportive district and school administration she benefited from, the teacher also noted the importance of additional backup from larger collectives:

There's a group called Honesty for Ohio Education. And our student group has been working with them directly since the fall. And they sort of helped train our students on how to write emails, how to draft testimony. And they've been awesome.

The teacher also noted that students deeply resentful of censorship efforts were themselves getting active:

They're pissed. They think it's ridiculous. And it's hard for them to wrap their heads around why politicians would be using...the lives of children who identify as LGBTQ to like, gain political clout. That's hard for them to understand. And so that's why we

have so many students interested in this activism work.

The Colorado Equity Director also described a powerful local community organizing beginning to call for recall of the flipped school board members who were trying to restrict learning:

Our [community] group that has started challenging some of these folks, they show out in force and there's a lot of them. And I know that they're going to push for recall this June, and I think they'll win.

Finally, some educators were speaking up by talking directly with local critics about their efforts to discuss race and diversity in schools. The white male teacher in New York City believed that adults as well as youth needed to be engaged in dialogue *about* talking about race in school:

I've found that there are students who bristle a bit when ...things like CRT come up or, you know, things that would be considered a democratic or left wing talking point. But they're not automatically turning off to it. They raise a skeptical eyebrow but... they want to know more, they want to understand well.

Educators, too, needed more dialogue about race discussions, he said. The educator described how colleagues who had also “bristled” when they felt an “implicit bias” PD facilitator “pigeonholed” teachers into a single perspective were welcoming antiracist programs “rolling out” in a more dialogical way. He said that while the anti “CRT” wave was fueled by a “right-wing” “vocal fringe...that worry that [efforts to discuss race] is indoctrination of children, some communist takeover of education,” a pro-antiracism wing also needed to discuss antiracist work more. “There are people, I think, who have legitimate questions that, if only. ...a sane calm dialogue could be had, I think could be brought around, to understand what's trying to be done.”

At the same time, the North Carolina teacher (working also as a school “equity” lead in his somewhat “progressive,” racially mixed/majority

white, rapid change district) noted that dialogue might not work with those people on “the other side” who tended to “scream louder.” Those trying to restrict learning in his district, he said, were “people who are typically conservative Republicans and very staunch Trump supporters. You know, we don’t have that many here. But again, those people are loud, and they don’t mind, you know getting out there and just screaming in the wind”:

Great teachers are in it because they love to teach children. But people who are trying to draw attention... they're louder than we are. That's why you hear so much on the other side. They're louder. ...I personally believe there are more people who ...are willing to go with a more open approach. But that minority of people who don't are loud, and they will scream, and they will scream louder.

Further, he noted, race division locally was getting very ugly, requiring louder “voices of reason.” Otherwise, he said, “you’re gonna lose an argument”:

We've had Klan marches. Never in [our] county have we had Klan rallies and Klan marches and people coming down and complaining about Critical Race Theory and trying to demonize. White peoplewe've never had that before, because it's just not the community, but it's happening now. ...And you know... we got to go through [this] for the next couple of years. we need to be louder, voices of reason that are not quiet. We need to, you know, *show* our reason, and be bold with it, and say, hey, you know, this is what I believe. This is what I think will work. And let's work together to get to a common solution that can help our children.

“The context of it all that we’re living in is a lot,” he concluded. “And ...we are the caretakers of education in the future. And it’s a responsibility.”

The Missouri teacher emphasized the need for local educators to be “protected” from state politicians’ restriction efforts particularly, noting, “I mean, we

have an Attorney General who’s sue happy— Eric Schmidt just sued every school district in our State. And now he’s running for Senate, isn’t that lovely— sued every district in the State.” Simultaneously, she also described her tactics for engaging the vocal minority of white community members trying to leverage such restriction energy to restrict learning via school boards near her. She shared her theory that after years of white families ignoring “Uncle Ben” saying racist things at the dinner table, Uncle Ben now falsely thought he was empowered to shut others down:

You and I both have enough knowledge to know that the school boards don't represent a huge chunk of people. It's just who shows up, it's getting your people out. But see, in their minds they represent this huge majority because they were allowed to win. That's the cost of ignoring Uncle Ben.... Uncle Ben thinks everybody's like him.

She then described her own way of inviting ongoing dialogue with inflamed parents who tapped “Fox News talking points” and accused her of “indoctrination,” a type of leadership and engagement she said her own district was not modeling:

[there was] this parent who was like... “Well, you know, I looked at all these readings that you’re offering. And this sounds like a Liberal, you know, liberal leaning class.” ...And then, of course, you heard all these Fox News keywords, you know, like [mimicking] “Oh, indoctrination!” [and] “you know we’re showing all these... minority kids, victimhood!” ...And ... I said [to the parent], “You know, I have a variety of voices in my curriculum.” I said, “What concerns me, is that I’ve received pushback after week two of one reading, and as it was a message that you were not comfortable with, [you say] ‘indoctrination.’ Okay, so you want me to present like Thomas Sowell and other [conservative perspectives] to these kids, and I don’t have a problem with it, because I do have Thomas Sowell in my curriculum. But you don’t consider *that* indoctrination.”

She joked that “I’m a poor indoctrinator, because I’m putting out my lesson plans every week along with the readings, along with every prompt that I’m asking.” She described sitting down with white parents to actually talk through their concerns and what she as a teacher was doing to engage many perspectives, which she described as effort to engage, not “comfort white people”:

When I go to contentious School Board meetings, I sit down with those parents, and I speak to them...I was at one school board meeting in a [nearby] school district ... one of those places where people have ...said things [like] “you’re sexual groomers.” So I go there, and this man walks up with the anti-CRT pamphlet. ...You’re a white man, and you walk up to me with the “anti-CRT”?! That takes some guts, right? ... just takes some guts. ... [and] he’s like, “This is what’s going on in our schools?!” [And] I said, “Well, sir, you and I aren’t going to agree. I’ll listen. Let me ask you a question. What bothers you about public schools?” And so we sat down and talked.

The parent had admitted to her that “Hey, my kid was failing. I was trying to get in contact with folks, and no one got back with me.” “I said, ‘Let’s walk through some things that you can do to advocate for a child in a healthy way,’” she recalled, adding, “Hmm. Do you know, CRT was never brought up again in that conversation?” She continued to describe the importance of talking with parents, even angry ones:

Here’s the thing—people have used “CRT” as the mask for what’s really wrong. I want to get under that mask. And when I get under it—like I said, that parent never talked about CRT again. He talked about what was wrong with his child, and why he was scared. That’s where the healing takes place. And too many—too many of our school districts have opted out of healing their communities, and decided to avoid conflict.

She continued to describe how “hard” it was to step into these conflictual dialogues, after several years

of disconnection with parents over the pandemic and now, “CRT.” She was doing work now that her district should have led earlier, she said:

In our fight for this with CRT, we’ve been very cowardly. We have to be willing to take on conflict and to heal our communities. I told one school district three years ago: Your parents seem to be angry. Let’s get everybody together and talk about this. [They said,] “We’ll take care of it in the fall. ...” I got the very “school” answer. Now all those folks are elected to your school board who are anti-CRT. But if you took care of it in the fall... Imagine if we had tried healing early on. A lot of these conversations would look different right now, but they don’t because we avoided it.

She added,

I just kept talking to these parents who were considered the enemy. (...) By the end of our conversation CRT didn’t come up. Hmm. The concern *was*, “I wanted to advocate for my child because I was scared, and I didn’t know how to.” These people who really are pushing this, like our lawmakers in Missouri—and I want everybody to differentiate them from these parents—our lawmakers helped with this, and I have confronted them about this. I said, “*How dare you run on this?*”

She asked the interviewer if we had children, and then continued:

What if I told you your children were in danger right now?... What if I told you something right now-- “*It’s gonna happen to your kids!*” You would jump into *mode*. [As if speaking to politicians], You have emotionally gaslit these parents, and you weaponized it politically. You’re monsters for that. You did the worst thing you could do to a parent. You told them their child was in danger. And I said [as if speaking to school district], “Hey, we were in the middle of Covid. We’re in the middle of all this stuff that they don’t understand, and they’re trying

to understand. And in school you're not talking to them on top of it. You [didn't] even try to talk them down. So these people came in as opportunists and did your jobs. And now here they are." I try to build a bridge.

Discussion and Conclusion

Data here suggest that amidst multi-level efforts by politicians, media, organizations, and inflamed individuals to restrict learning, the nation may be heading toward two schooling systems: one where children and adults get to talk openly about their diverse society and selves, and one where they are restricted or even prohibited from doing so. Today, actual and threatened restrictions on school talk increasingly are stopping many adults and young people from discussing and *learning* to discuss, in schools, race and diversity issues in our society and shared lives.

Contexts for talking and learning differed tremendously across the 16 educators interviewed here. Some educators and their students enjoyed support and freedom in such discussion and learning, in states without legal restriction efforts and in some supportive communities within restriction-leaning states. Other educators emphasized local fear of restriction efforts emanating from state legislation and orders, national media and organizations, school board directives, and local actors wielding national talking points even as individuals or tiny groups. Respondents described how throughout these system levels, as higher powers threatened punishment, local people helped *effect* restriction, or conversely, protected the ability to talk and learn. The role of local school and district leadership was pivotal: In some states, the silencing intended by state politicians and policy was *achieved* as local leaders cautioned teachers to obey vague provisions, emailed teachers about avoiding topics, or failed to articulate teacher/student rights to teach and learn. Even in states *without* bills or laws, some local leaders buckled to inflamed local people exerting restriction pressure. In the absence of backup from "supportive administration," teachers also cautioned and censored themselves. Conversely, local leaders and teachers could keep

working to protect learning even in a state with pending laws or orders, particularly *if local communities and colleagues actively supported them*.

Fear pervaded this data. In many cases discussed here, people in systems anticipated broader punishment (e.g., from a state tip line, a law or pending bill, a school board, or media shaming or "legal" action triggered by inflamed local critics), and in sensing no available protection, shut down work proactively. Educators described such silencing or subduing as caused by official policy (a passed state law; a Board decision to not renew a superintendent or ED), by pending policy (restrictive bills filed or likely Board actions on people's minds), and by unofficial policy (a principal's quiet cancellation of programming to address racial disparities; a district that no longer wanted to "touch" inclusion work). Yet bravery hummed in this data too. Throughout the data shared here, educators described the daily work needed and occurring to protect the basic ability to speak and learn with students and colleagues.

Respondents repeatedly demonstrated how local *leaders*, enmeshed in varying state and local contexts amidst a national campaign, played a pivotal role in how restriction efforts proceeded or didn't. Respondents lauded superintendents broadcasting public messages of support for learning, district staff telling "equity leads" about resources and providing empathetic listening, and principals engaging with angry parents for exhausted teachers. They critiqued leaders who silenced or subdued talk through their own prohibitions, cautions, or passivity in the face of broader restriction effort. Crucially, they also emphasized the importance of leadership taken up informally across systems, such as local organizations that publicly signaled being "on board" with DEI efforts; experienced teacher colleagues who stood ready to matter-of-factly discuss teaching efforts with peers and parents; consultants who helped superintendents prepare talking points to engage community critics; and teachers who talked patiently with angry parents themselves. In a form of distributed leadership (Diamond & Spillane 2016), "leaders" with and without formal titles thus protected talking and

teaching through their efforts to keep trying to talk, teach, and learn, in roles throughout systems. But some educators here stood up for teaching and learning largely alone.

While we do not have sufficient data for formal claims about demographic trends, we note informally that the overt support stories highlighted here came from “liberal” communities, both predominantly BIPOC districts and a predominantly white district, while overt restriction stories of both silencing and subduing came not only from politically contested “Purple” communities (emphasized in Rogers & Kahne, 2022) or “rapid change” communities with declining white students (emphasized in Pollock & Rogers, et al, 2022), but also from conservative and even some liberal districts where respondents said leaders succumbed to white and particularly “conservative” critics’ demands.⁹ Notably, we did not yet tap many stories of local leadership overtly protecting learning in states with draconian law, or in “conservative” strongholds; it is possible such work is occurring quietly, without “fanfare” (Cohn, 2023). Next research should prioritize exploring such educator experiences.

Respondents also often indicated that a broader majority – notably, a white majority in many districts here – remained troublingly silent as small groups of largely white and highly “conservative” inflamed people targeted learning. (While nonwhite critics were quite possibly also demanding less discussion of LGBTQ lives or even race, this dynamic was not noted explicitly by these respondents and requires additional research.) The phenomenon of bending to a highly vocal minority -- “dancing for one percent,” as one educator put it -- demands deep reflection today. Recent research indicates that the majority of U.S. K12 parents actually show “widespread agreement for students learning about the experiences of people of color” and (particularly when older) LGBTQ experiences as well, even while they have diverse views about how to discuss such issues (Polikoff et al, 2022, p. 16, 27). While respondents described largely BIPOC communities and some predominantly white more “progressive” communities actively protecting such learning, respondents often explicitly framed the critics trying to shut learning down as

particularly loud white people *enabled* by more silent majorities, ranging from single “loud” individuals to small groups lodging “frequent” “opposition,” to local Proud Boys and “the Klan,” to inflamed state politicians themselves. In many cases here, further, educators described formal leaders locally reacting to the feared threat of restriction, triggered by this white, extremely “loud,” sometimes *very* small minority threatening to catalyze potential punishment by state governments, legal power, and conservative media. In reaction to threat from this “1 percent,” as one educator put it, some local leaders were shutting down talk and work preemptively. Without strong leadership on Boards, in districts, and in schools backing up the need to keep trying to engage issues of race and diversity, the combination of restriction pressures could cancel conversation for both adults and youth.

Crucially, many respondents described limiting both talk *and student support* in reaction to national, state, and local pressures. In a restriction fractal (a pattern that repeats in an ever-smaller size), a bill or executive order might try to censor conversations with students across the state; a district lawyer or school leader in a community with specific pressures might caution against “bringing race into it” in class. Threatened by a government “tip line” or a new school board, an Equity Director might end improvement conversations with Black parents. Threatened by pending law or local frequent complainers wielding national talking points, a principal might end a program to remedy racial disparities or take down a student poster with a race- or gender-related symbol. A single teacher might proceed more cautiously or stop discussing The Bill of Rights, or skip discussing racialized history in a lesson, or rethink available books. Each restriction of talk restricted both educators’ own learning and work, and *student support efforts* engaging realities of race and diversity— such as an equity program sent “underground” by a school board, a superintendent no longer pursuing professional learning on teaching literature, or a teacher just hesitating to even answer students’ race or gender-related questions.

Amidst national, state, and local pressures, then, local people’s actions combined to support or

constrain local students' and adults' opportunity to learn. Educators working in systems with supportive leaders, colleagues, and communities together kept learning going. Educators working in places with less protection from leadership and community watched proactive student support efforts cease, found themselves talking far less about society at work, watched professional development get canceled, or hesitated before even countering harassment or allowing classroom books visibly "supporting perspectives of the LGBT community or students of color."

All of this is today's chilling effect – with dire consequences for students themselves.

Respondents made clear that *where* one works fundamentally shapes support or punishment for talking – and so, how one supports students at work. Respondents noted that it was far easier for leaders themselves to protect student support efforts when entire communities were themselves "liberal" or "supportive," or, of course, in states without restrictive legislation. Often, supportive leaders themselves were described as having vocal support from other colleagues, Boards, and community members where they worked. Educators in less-supported places described the chilling effect otherwise in action, often combining state laws or local "conservative" populations with top-down silencing, administrator cautioning, self-censoring, and overall fear often sparked by a leadership vacuum in the face of inflamed local critics. Crucially, respondents also emphasized that in such a punishment context, without protective leader behavior, only the most supported, experienced, or brave colleagues could keep *learning to improve* in discussing and engaging these issues at work – a deeply concerning outcome in a nation that truly needs educators to keep improving on just this craft.

Educators interviewed here thus called repeatedly for local education leaders *and* broader communities to speak up more to protect learning and improvement effort in their systems. Educators indicated that amidst restriction threats, both leaders and teachers cannot be left alone in insisting on children's and adults' right to talk and learn about race and diversity in schools. Today, student support will rely on how district leaders, school leaders,

teachers, *and the full communities being served by public schools* speak up to explain, justify, continue, and improve their student support efforts in reaction to both local and external pressures to restrict talking and learning.

Conclusion

We thus ask open questions in conclusion. Since the field already agrees that dialogue and learning about race and diversity is of course a necessary part of student support in a diverse democracy (Lee et al, 2021), how might the quieter majority of parents, communities, students, and indeed researchers add support for educators in all locations to *keep learning* to talk about such real experiences in U.S. society in efforts to support young people? Might such a call to *keep learning to talk effectively* in schools and districts about the realities of race, inequality, history, gender, and sexual identity, with student support as goal, successfully neuter efforts by some to restrict talk and "ban" learning altogether? How might the field support leaders to keep trying to support learning in communities where supportive majorities are silent? Who might support teachers and youth directly in communities where leaders themselves are not willing to protect learning, particularly in the seemingly "conservative" and contested communities where talk restrictions are particularly threatened? In the months and years to come, how will the field protect teaching and learning in the increasing number of states where restrictions are legally enforceable? And in locations of all kinds, might more people simply show up *to* talk as restrictions loom, to collectively back up educators' and students' ability to talk toward supporting young people better in schools? As the teacher in Ohio, a state facing deeply restrictive bills, put it,

I wish that people, more parents and community members felt compelled to actually do something– not just to care about it, because I know that they do– but to actually email, make phone calls, attend city council meetings, attend school board meetings, and say, "We support these efforts," so that the school board isn't just

hearing from the opposition. I wish that more people felt compelled to do that.

The fate of our nation's teaching, learning, and student support is up not only to the nation's teachers, principals, and superintendents, but us all.

Endnotes

The 2021 survey results discussed in this piece were first analyzed in our self-published report released in January 2022, "The Conflict Campaign: Local Experiences of the Campaign to Ban 'Critical Race Theory' in Public K12 Education in the U.S., 2020-2021" (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022). Authors 1-3 gratefully acknowledge coauthors of that original January 2022 Conflict Campaign report, particularly John Rogers. Some of the key findings of that self-published report appear here to lay the groundwork for our 2021-2022 interview findings.

² We have considered any possible ableism in the term *colormute*, 20 years after its first use. While retaining the word "mute" to describe an "inability" to speak would be archaic and problematic, "colormuteness" describes actively *muting* speech and indicates that "muting" race talk is often an active choice, not an "ability." So, we retain the term for today, while acknowledging potentially harmful misuse. Here, by the shorthand term "talk" we mean dialogue and communication in any form and in any language, including written communication, as in the book *Schooltalk* (Pollock 2017).

³ We utilized the following demographic categories as in our 2022 report, and we use them in this paper as well (Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022, p. 52):

"Using the most recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), we place school districts into three groups of districts that serve roughly equal numbers of K-12 students in the United States. Majority Students of Color districts enroll 0-49.9% White students. Racially Mixed and Majority White districts enroll 50% to 84.9% White students. Predominantly White districts enroll 85% to 100% White students."

"Minimal Change districts have experienced less than a 5% decline in White student enrollment;

Moderate Change districts have experienced between a 5% and 9.9% decline; Substantial Change districts have experienced between a 10% and 17.9% decline; and Rapid Change districts have experienced more than an 18% decline in White enrollment."

"We used the percentage of the 2020 Presidential vote that went for Trump in each Congressional District as a measure for the partisan lean of communities surrounding school districts. We labeled school districts 'Liberal' if they are located in Congressional Districts where less than 40% of the vote went to Trump; 'Liberal Leaning' if between 40% and 44.9% voted for Trump; 'Contested' if between 45% and 54.9% voted for Trump; 'Conservative Leaning' if between 55% and 59.9% voted for Trump; and 'Conservative' if more than 60% voted for Trump."

⁴ State-level bills still pending fail at the end of the calendar year and have to be reintroduced to be considered again. We thus indicate here whether bills were filed at the time when data was gathered.

⁵ See endnote 2.

⁶ We list interviewees in the order we share their words in the Findings section. Race and gender are listed in the language used by interviewee. Legal context describes the status of interviewee's state at the time of their interview. See endnote 3 for an explanation of the remaining categories listed in this table. In a few cases where we chose not to specify demographics to protect anonymity, we say "unavailable" and describe these demographics in Findings as the interviewee did. NA in the % change column means no drop in white students.

⁷ See endnote 3 for these categories.

⁸ See Pollock & Rogers, et al., 2022, on repeated caricatured talking points about "CRT" shared via conservative media and organizations' "toolkits."

⁹ Future work should also explore the proportion of "historically advantaged," "low-poverty districts," and suburban districts among the "majority-white districts" restricting learning, demographic factors emphasized by others (Jochim et al, 2023). We did not explore income level or urbanicity here, nor delve deeply into teachers' specific discipline or grade level as researchers are starting to indicate is necessary (Polikoff et al, 2022).

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